

Leadership from the Clock Tower

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Siena is a medieval walled city in the Tuscany region of Italy. On the first weekend of July every year, the city is taken over by a horse race called the “Palio de Siena”. The Palio is cause for celebration – eating, drinking, and competition for bragging rights between the 17 contrada (neighborhoods) that compete in the race.

The race begins with 17 horses and 17 riders, and concludes with a winner, and usually finishes with a number of horses and riders somewhat less than 17. The contrade of the horse who crosses the finish line first is the victor regardless of whether or not the rider is still on board. Liability concerns would likely prevent such an event in the US, and if not, then PETA surely would.

To be a spectator of the race and a participant in the festival you have several options. If you have connections, you may be able to watch from the balcony of one of the apartments that ring the central piazza above the race course which is the narrow road that circles the piazza. If you are exceedingly creative, there is a very slim possibility that you could not be kicked out of the clock tower prior to the race which would also afford an all encompassing view of the race and everything else going on in the piazza, balconies, and businesses surrounding the piazza. For the most part, however, being a spectator means getting into the piazza around noon for an anticipated 7pm start and staking out a spot on one of the four corners because that is where the greatest pandemonium takes place. You must be in the piazza by 4pm because from that point on the polezei closes it off and you can’t enter or leave. The heat is blistering and also merciful in that it reduces the need for access to restrooms that are unavailable.

Being in the piazza is a lot of fun, it is where the action is, but you can only see a very small part of the action. Much like a leader who persistently succumbs to addressing the fire of the moment, your perspective regarding the big picture is quite limited. We like the excitement of being where the action is. It is rewarding to be a paramedic on the emergency crew that helps the rider who has been thrown into the stone façade of a building on turn 3. As leaders, however, our focus needs to be on the big picture of the festival and we can only see the full picture from the clock tower.

Are you spending the right amount of time in the clock tower to ensure that you clearly see the big picture and are working on it through others in the most effective way? Are you avoiding being drawn to the piazza by every accident or dysfunction? Are you spending enough time talking with the customers in the piazza, the people making the festival work, and the shopkeepers to validate the perspective you have from the clock tower and to engage people in ways that help you achieve your vision?



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