

Setting the Fast Zebras Free

It is hard for those who have not personally experienced the working environment of the United Nations to fully appreciate the bureaucratic protocols, matrixed structures, process complexity, and multicultural influences at play there. However, it is not hard to imagine how difficult it must be to get anything done efficiently in an organization as complicated as the UN. Nor is it difficult to picture the frustrations that a newcomer must feel in trying to understand which players need to be involved, when, and for what purpose, just to get something done. Add to this the fact that most political appointees are in their positions for a short period of time, and you can begin to see why figuring out how to navigate the informal waters is essential.

We were fortunate enough to meet with Mark D. Wallace, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations during the Bush administration, who painted for us an informal portrait of how the UN works. Wallace understands very well the challenges involved and explained to us how he worked to balance the many competing interests that existed within his office and across the entire organization of the UN.

Wallace was well prepared for his UN experience. He began his work in government as a private lawyer working for the City of

Miami Emergency Financial Oversight Board. After taking part in the 2000 presidential election recount and the Homeland Security departmental reconfiguration, he joined the 2004 presidential reelection campaign as deputy campaign manager, with responsibilities that included, among other things, acting as message manager for the Republican convention. Following the GOP's unexpected victory, President George W. Bush appointed him to the U.S. mission to the United Nations. With charismatic good humor, Wallace talked with us about his role as a political appointee, and the challenges that accompany it. "One of the advantages of winning," he joked, "is that, Democrat or Republican, there are a number of positions that will always be filled by the people—hopefully the best people—who got you there."

However, the world one enters as an appointee to the UN is very different from life on the campaign trail, where the speed and unpredictability of events create an often haphazard and highly informal environment. This places a premium on rapid responsiveness, high tolerance for uncertainty, and perhaps a love of ambiguity. There is always a tremendous amount of work to be done, and so, as Wallace says, "It becomes very clear, very quickly, who the fast zebras are."

Fast zebras is one of Wallace's favorite metaphors for those people who have the ability to absorb information and adapt to sudden challenges capably and quickly. On the African savannah, it is the fast zebra that survives a visit to the watering hole, drinking quickly and moving on, while the slower herd members fall prey to predators lurking in the shadows.

The fast zebra is, in essence, a person who knows how to draw on both the formal and informal organizations with equal facility. As a manager, Wallace knew that recruiting those people who helped him in the extremely informal environment of the presidential campaign would very likely be able to help him in the extremely formal bureaucracy he would have to negotiate as a political appointee to the UN.

To give us a better understanding of the nature of the fast zebra, Wallace introduced us to one of his most treasured associates, Henley MacIntyre. She began as a volunteer intern on the campaign, quickly rose through the organization, and worked closely with Wallace at the convention. After the election and a stint at the White House, she joined him at the UN.

MacIntyre has an outgoing personality and Texas-style charm that are immediately disarming. And, as she explains, all her charm was necessary at the UN as well as on the campaign trail. When MacIntyre joined the 2004 campaign, it was her first job out of college, and her first job in Washington. “I was really green,” she readily admits. But her desk was right outside Wallace’s office and she immediately saw that he “always treated his team as equals and was sure to give credit and positive reinforcement whenever possible.” This made MacIntyre eager to please the boss, and she felt no qualms about putting in sixty-hour weeks.

Wallace was, indeed, extremely pleased with MacIntyre’s performance and soon promoted her to be his assistant. Then, as the convention approached, MacIntyre spotted a crisis in the making. With only four days to go before delegates began to arrive, Henley and a colleague learned that the movements—arrivals, departures, appearances, seating arrangements—for many of the speakers and other “big dogs” who would be attending the convention had yet to be adequately coordinated. This work was not part of MacIntyre’s formal job description (she didn’t really have one, anyway) and she wasn’t sure if it might be someone else’s responsibility. No matter. MacIntyre took on the task herself. She spent the next four days on the phone, figuring out who should arrive when, where they should sit, and who couldn’t sit next to each other for political reasons. It involved navigating a complicated web of networks. Not only did MacIntyre manage to understand and organize it, she made herself a part of it, personally connecting with many big donors and other players throughout the convention.

MacIntyre's ability, commitment, and good humor impressed not only Wallace but also the White House political director, and her savvy and execution in the clutch of the convention won her an offer for a position in the White House. While Wallace knew it would be to her advantage to take on such a high-profile role, he told her that anytime she wanted to join his staff when he moved to the UN, she had a place. Sure enough, after she had spent several months in Washington, and a few months after Wallace took up his position at the UN, MacIntyre decided to bring her talents to New York and the international arena of the United Nations.

BRINGING AGILITY TO THE UN

MacIntyre's rise is a classic example of what a fast zebra can accomplish in a fast-paced and high-intensity environment. It is also a great example of how important one's informal sensitivity can be when the situation is complicated by an entrenched bureaucratic culture. Transferring the informal talents that helped during the campaign to an appointee's position in the highly formalized world of international diplomacy was a challenge that required Wallace and MacIntyre to stretch their informal organization muscles. MacIntyre astutely saw where the lines were, and she led outside them when necessary.

As Wallace explains, two types of people work at the UN, and they are fundamentally different: political appointees and their staff, who are there for relatively limited periods of time, and the Foreign Service career staff members, who may spend their entire professional lives working at the UN. An appointee has comparatively little time to effect lasting positive change. For example, most major change efforts in the business world require several years to accomplish; most political appointees are in the job for fewer than two years. As a result, Wallace found it was crucial to have access to his

own herd of fast zebras who could build credibility as well as act and adapt quickly. There is no time for training or gradual acclimation to the role—selection of the right people, like MacIntyre, is crucial.

With the aid of a core team of fast zebras, Wallace was able to institute significant change, beginning in his own shop. He started by trying to remove some formal obstacles, such as the use of cumbersome briefing booklets as background for dialogues and major decisions. The creation of these books, sometimes hundreds of pages long, had become institutionalized over the years as the best way to catalogue and convey useful information throughout the formal hierarchy. Obviously, their original purpose was long gone.

Wallace knew that before he could do away with—or even significantly modify—this antiquated process, he and his team would have to gain the respect of their colleagues who had long relied on these briefing books and still believed in their value. To do so, Wallace decided he would have to prove two things: first, that his team could produce good briefing books in the traditional manner; and second, that they could develop a better, faster way to internalize and master the same massive quantities of information, without the “bugsmasher” book.

While clearly not as simple as it sounds, the new system worked and saved the U.S. mission countless hours. It also freed up Wallace’s staff to research new topics instead of covering well-worn ground. He worked hard to show his people that he’d rather have them suggest and carry out their own research than prep him, and this empowered and energized long-term staffers and appointees alike. At the same time, Wallace attributes much of this success to the respect he and his team showed to those who had favored the old system. They acted collectively as fast zebras to achieve a result that Wallace would have found hard to achieve otherwise.

Informal behaviors that demonstrate respect, humility, and humor, Wallace says, are key tools for his fast zebras, as well as for his own interactions at the UN. These are probably at least as important

as formal skills that reflect a person's intelligence, experience, and education. Given his operating style on the campaign trail or in his shop, Wallace isn't afraid to jump into the trenches and get his hands dirty. He doesn't routinely submit to the traditional hierarchies of the diplomatic service. He believes that far more mileage can be gained by treating everyone equally and respectfully.

Wallace's informal savvy paid off in very tangible ways. For example, during the course of events at the UN, it sometimes happens that a country delegation—one that had been encouraged to vote against a U.S. sponsored initiative—breaks ranks and becomes a U.S. ally on a vote, simply due to the respect Wallace showed its ambassador in the hallway. By the same token, the United States must play its role deftly. As a superpower, the United States is often the target of animosity and resentment. But to remain effective and avoid antagonizing those who are predetermined obstructionists, U.S. ambassadors need to maintain deference and propriety, even in the face of belligerence. When you are, as Wallace describes it, “the hegemon,” you have to remain above the fray, or risk exacerbating an already delicate situation. And just as humor can be an asset in the high-stress environment of a political campaign, it can also be an advantageous weapon in one's debate arsenal.

While Wallace recognizes that the U.S. position often makes it difficult for his team to get things done, he also makes good use of the difficulty, and turns that challenge into a source of pride. For example, before large meetings, he and his staff will sometimes do their fun version of a Maori haka (a war dance of New Zealand origin). Wallace knows that his fast zebras thrive on overcoming obstacles—as they did in the realm of the political campaign—so he tries to rally, motivate, and energize them in their new, intensely hierarchical environment by creating the same sense of tackling an impossible mission. Prior to a recent vote, Wallace says, he exclaimed, “A hundred ninety-one nations against one. I like our odds!”

As an appointee, Wallace spent only a short amount of time at the UN, but his informal instincts will undoubtedly have a lasting impact on the U.S. mission and the entire organization, as he left behind a crisp example for others to follow. Informal and fast zebra techniques were ultimately effective at cracking the code of success at the UN, despite its legacy of tradition and hierarchy.



Clearly, fast zebras can help the stiff joints of overly formal organizations move smoothly again. They help the formal organization get unstuck when surprises come its way, or when it's time to head in a new direction. They have the ability to understand how the organization works, and the street smarts to figure out how to get around stubborn obstacles. They draw on values and personal relationships to help people make choices that align with overall strategy and get around misguided policy. They draw on networks to form teams that collaborate on problems not owned by any formal structure. They tap into different sources of pride to motivate the behaviors ignored by formal reward systems.

However, it can be lonely to be the only fast zebra at the watering hole. So wise leaders identify their fast zebras and help create conditions that will attract more of their kind. By creating a herd, leaders can accelerate more quickly and on a broader scale than any one fast zebra could on its own.

MOBILIZING THE RIGHT CROWDS TO TRANSFORM PS 130

In 1990, when Lily Din Woo was brought in to replace the outgoing principal of the Hernando DeSoto School, PS 130 in Manhattan's Chinatown, the school was barely meeting the state-mandated

performance requirements. It was on the brink of becoming a SURR school (School under Registration Review), meaning that it would be placed on the academic failure list. Continuation on this list would lead to restructuring or even closure. To make matters worse, Woo was a surprise choice for the position. The school community had assumed that the long-serving and well-liked assistant principal would get the job. Who was this Lily Woo, coming in from the outside?

Today, PS 130 is considered one of the best public elementary schools in New York, regularly scoring in the top 10 percent. Woo is recognized as one of the most successful and innovative principals in the public school system. And the school community respects and even loves her. It was a remarkable turnaround, indeed.

How did Woo accomplish it? By tapping into informal school networks and changing the balance in what had been an overly formal organization. There is no doubt that Woo has a very high OQ—she has a formidable mastery of the formal school structures and processes, as well as a deep understanding of the strong social networks that exist within a public institution of education. In her earlier life, she was almost certainly a fast zebra—and she has not forgotten those insights.

The Crowd Was Against Her to Start

The Department of Education in New York City is a complex bureaucracy that has long frustrated principals and other educators who have wanted to make reforms or institute innovations. The system demands that teachers and administrators follow the rules, adhere to procedures, and complete mountains of paperwork—even if the formalities seem to get in the way of the system's primary mission: to ensure that every member of an incredibly diverse student body receives a good education. What's more, the system is sharply divided into constituencies that don't always see eye to eye. Parents,

the teachers' union, school administration, system administration—and, oh yes, students—often found themselves at odds with each other, working at cross-purposes, and even in direct confrontation.

Woo knew all this, of course, when she took over as principal. She also knew that, to avoid the possibility of closure, PS 130 could not continue to operate as it had been. Something had to give.

What she did not expect, however, was the frigid reception she would get when she came aboard. She had worked for decades in the public school system—as a teacher, staff developer, and administrator—and she was a well-known member of the Chinatown community. None of that mattered. Woo was an outsider to PS 130 and had elbowed aside the beloved assistant principal. Many parents and teachers felt so negatively about Woo's appointment that they made formal protest to the school authorities.

Clearly, Woo had to win over the faculty, the administration, the teachers' union, and the parents, which was going to be an uphill battle. She accomplished it, over a period of years, by making formal changes and by drawing on informal networks. For example, Woo cut costs, one of the most traditional formal mechanisms of change. She made sure, however, to include her own office in the cost-cutting, by reducing the number of secretaries in the principal's office from three to one.

She articulated her own informal set of educational standards—to supplement the formal metrics of the public system—and distributed them to and discussed them at length with all teachers. The standards had to do with innovation, information sharing, and connecting with students.

Woo identified the school's main areas of weakness in the educational program and worked tirelessly to improve them. For example, she found that many of the students at PS 130 struggled with the English language and that the language skills curriculum was not up to snuff, so she fought for resources to improve the teaching

of English. To build better relationships with parents, she offered free English classes for adults, which she taught herself until a few sympathetic teachers volunteered to help her.

PS 130 parents had long complained that the math curriculum was too easy for their children, so Woo found ways to make it better meet the students' needs and align better with the parents' expectations. To improve her standing with teachers, she helped to design a much more flexible and comprehensive skills development program. Gradually, the tide turned.

As Woo gained the trust of the different constituencies and created links among them, she found that amazing things could happen. As test scores rose and programs were added and expanded, the Parents Association voluntarily hosted a Chinese banquet. Not only did the event publicly celebrate the school's success, the admission fees were used to create a fund to support further improvement to the curriculum. (The banquet is now held annually and raises some \$90,000 per year for the school.)

With the proceeds from other intensified fundraising efforts, Woo was able to start up new enrichment programs for students, including arts classes (traditionally underfunded by the city). Moreover, the school community grew into a much more cohesive social network. It became a wise and collaborative crowd, rather than an angry, divisive one.

"The credit lies with Principal Lily Woo," as one third-grade parent said. "She manages to combine a genius for fiscal management with the hands-on involvement that finds her sitting at the door of the school every morning greeting her 1000+ students by name."¹

Gradually and with great determination, Woo managed to create a virtuous cycle. Every time she drew on her informal network to navigate the formal labyrinth, the success of her efforts strengthened the network still further. Part of this success had to do with Woo's ability to know when to try new ways of doing things. "It's like

GPS—if you’re on the wrong route, you have to find a way back to a road that will lead you to the location you want to get to. If you force yourself to go down only one road, you’re going to hit a ditch or a dead end, and then what?”

The Storeroom Bottleneck

The story of the storeroom at PS 130 provides a good example of Woo’s ability to find a new route around a very old and divisive problem. She found it thanks to a basic problem and the resulting revelation—both as obvious and fundamental as Ed Carolan’s realization about the importance of hours to the StockPot employees.

It all started when Woo’s chair broke. “One of the wheels fell off and I couldn’t get it back on, so I bought myself a new chair. The faculty said, how could you buy yourself a fancy new chair? We need this, and we need that. And it dawned on me. Duh. They need stuff.”

But to get the supplies they needed, teachers had to go through an elaborate and antiquated formal process. “There was a supply lady, and there were supplies,” Woo said. “But I didn’t understand the system of how the supplies were given out. The teacher would say to the supply person, ‘I need chalk.’ And she would give out two pieces of chalk. Or, ‘I need paper.’ And the supply lady would ask, ‘How many children do you have in your class? Thirty? Here’s thirty sheets of paper.’ If you used up your thirty sheets and went back for more, it was, ‘Sorry, you’ve used up September’s allotment.’”

So Woo went down to the storage room to take a look for herself. “I saw a whole room full of stuff. Paper that was turning yellow. There was a hoarding going on, a saving. The supply people were afraid that we were never going to have stuff again. So I took apart the supply closet and just gave out everything. I said, ‘You need paper?’ Here’s two reams. ‘You need chalk?’ Take the whole box.”

The supply officer was horrified. “She said, ‘You can’t do that! You can’t do that!’ But I said, ‘Who said? This stuff is meant to be

used. We can buy new stuff.” Next, Woo examined the budget and found that there were too many people involved in the purchasing process. “It was one of those things where you’re keeping two or three people to keep the last one who’s doing the work of the four people. So I really kept on top of the people who needed to do work, and they didn’t like it, and they left.”

Instead of replacing those people, Woo transferred the budget to purchasing, but did the allocation of funds very differently from before. “For instance, we would get an allocation of \$50,000 to spend on books. We have fifty teachers. Fifty teachers divided into fifty thousand—everybody gets \$1,000. Seems equal and fair, but it’s really not. If you’ve been teaching twenty-six years, you’ve accumulated stuff. If you’re a brand new teacher, you’re going to need more support. So I started a wish list with them. They said, ‘What do you mean a wish list?’ I said, ‘A wish list. Tell me what you need.’”

In prior days, if the teachers knew about a \$50,000 allocation and their \$1,000 piece of it, they would find a way to spend the money, even if they didn’t need anything. “No teacher is going to be so generous as to say, ‘You know what, Lily, I don’t need my \$1,000. You can give it to him.’ Instead, you look through every catalog. ‘Let me see how I can spend \$1,000 exactly.’ Or maybe there is something you really need that costs \$1,050. You’ve only got \$1,000, so you can’t buy it. So you buy other stuff just to spend your \$1,000. So, we started with a wish list. And they said, ‘Well, how much are you giving us?’ I said, ‘I’m not telling you how much. Tell me what you want. And we’ll talk about it.’ And so we slowly started shifting, putting the money where it was needed.”

Why don’t more people look for alternate routes around obvious formal bottlenecks? “They don’t know any better,” Woo says. “They’re afraid to think outside the box, to ask, ‘Can I do this?’ And if there’s nothing that says you can’t, then you can.”

Making Magic Beyond PS 130

Today, thanks to Woo's efforts and those of her administration and faculty, PS 130 has become a model for other schools in the city system.

The school chancellors, whose formalities Woo often battled against early on, have embraced her and her methods. And, frustrated by their own excessive red tape and administrative roadblocks, they have begun several initiatives to mobilize informal social networks.

Eric Nadelstern, the Head of the Empowerment Program for the New York City Department of Education, told us that he thinks of Woo's approach as "creative noncompliance." In a system that had long been authoritarian and hierarchical, Nadelstern and his colleagues came to believe, thanks largely to Woo's example, that "autonomy is not a reward for having achieved success; it is a requirement of achieving success."

This is a radical change of attitude for the Department of Education. Formerly, each school belonged to a geographic district, led by a superintendent. All the principals in the district reported directly to the superintendent whose rules and regulations they were expected to follow.

This system had, Nadelstern says, "no accountability for results, only compliance with the rules." The principal who wanted career advancement knew that the best way to do so was to adhere to the rules and satisfy the superintendent; the school's educational performance was almost irrelevant.

The formal rules had their advantages, of course. They brought consistency and homogeneity to a system that previously had been a somewhat haphazard collection of schools with differing approaches and varying degrees of quality. Throughout the American public educational system, homogeneity has long been considered to be a good thing. The theory was that if every school had access to the same influences, every child would turn out the same.

But, as principals like Lily Woo—those with high OQ—proved that their creative noncompliance and individuated solutions almost always brought better results, Eric Nadelstern and his colleagues realized that a change in certain aspects of the formal organization—rather than a simple enhancement of the informal—was required. “Because people are all different, schools need to accommodate those differences,” Nadelstern told us. “It’s basic human nature. We had gone to an ingenious level to perfect a scalable but flawed educational model. The district-based system could not simply be incrementally reformed to match this shift in thinking, it had to be almost literally blown up and started again.”

The Empowerment Program

In 2006, New York initiated a program designed to give more independence to principals who had proved themselves to be masters of the informal organization. Called the Empowerment program, it was meant to give decision-making authority to those who worked more directly with students. Principals, for example, were given greater flexibility for making decisions about curriculum and more freedom to allocate their financial resources as they saw fit. Most received a \$100,000 discretionary fund.

In exchange for their new freedoms, the principals were to be held to a higher degree of accountability for the overall success of their schools and were required to sign agreements that included performance targets for a four-year period. In its first year, Empowerment schools performed better on average than the rest of New York’s public schools, scoring significantly higher on standardized math and reading exams. At the time of our interviews, 332 principals had agreed to participate in the Empowerment initiative.

To many educators, Empowerment represents a revolution rather than a mere reform. Principals no longer report to superin-

tendents. Rather the DOE's Empowerment support team reports to the principals—around twenty of them—who constitute a network, rather than a geographic district. The network support team works for the principals, helping them with curriculum changes, staff development, and budgeting. The formal expression of the change is that the administrator's bonuses are determined, not by the chancellors or the higher administration, but by the principals they serve.

The composition of the network has nothing to do with geography or grade level. Most networks are composed of schools located in a number of different boroughs and span Kindergarten through Grade 12. Principals often join a particular network because they want to work with its support team. Others join a network because it contains like-minded principals.

The Empowerment program not only granted more autonomy to principals, it enabled them to enhance their networks by giving them opportunities to connect with principals from all over the city. It also created a pride audience, in that the principals develop respect for others in their network and are loath to disappoint them. Simply put, members of the networks instilled pride in one another's efforts and achievements.

One final note: it's important to reiterate that Lily Woo did not *reject* the formal organization. She retained what worked best about the formal and found ways to fill the gaps and shortfalls with informal solutions. The proof that Woo's high-OQ methods are working lies not only in her school's performance but also in the support she has built among teachers, parents, and the Department of Education.

Woo's teachers became so dedicated to her that they were sometimes willing to teach as unpaid volunteers. One teacher asked to come on board three months before Woo expected to have the funding to pay him, just to be a part of her school.

Parents demonstrated their dedication to Woo by nominating her as an “everyday hero” with the Summer Olympics Committee in 2004. The letter they wrote earned her a spot as one of New York’s Olympic torch carriers that year.

And the DOE believed in Lily Woo so strongly that it invited PS 130 to be one of the pilot schools of the Empowerment network. She is a big fan of the program. “My staff loves it because they feel that we’re not beholden to anyone but ourselves. It really allows us to do what we need to do, without somebody hovering over us and saying, ‘you must do this initiative.’ We choose our initiatives, and we choose how we go about doing it.”



Fast zebras can be found in all kinds of organizations, and in many different roles. They are, however, still relatively rare animals. Obviously, a wise leader learns to recognize and use them effectively. They have the ability to navigate treacherous waters of complex organizations, as well as the wisdom to cultivate the informal relationships that will guide them to perform well. What is more important, however, is that even though the instinctive fast zebras are rare, most people in most organizations have the potential to improve those skills.

It boils down to paying closer attention to the informal elements in your organization. We all network informally to some extent. We don’t all, however, think rigorously about who we might add to our networks to enrich our work experience, or how we might more effectively influence those within our networks to help us perform better.

A few fast zebras, like Henley MacIntyre, are born that way or master their skills early on. Others, like Lily Woo, master them the

hard way, through years of trial and error under difficult circumstances. We believe, however, that most people can improve their organizational effectiveness and performance significantly by learning how to connect emotionally as well as rationally with a few more of their respected colleagues.

