



The key to a more businesslike politics is at hand

By Ron Shaich

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As someone who spent decades building Panera into one of the largest and most successful restaurant operations in the country, I've long believed that there is a fundamental difference that separates the world of politics from the world of business. Businesses invariably collapse in the face of persistent dysfunction, while political figures seem to thrive on it. Fortunately, that may be about to change. Presumed Speaker-elect Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has agreed to change the rules governing the legislative process at the insistence of the bipartisan House Problem Solvers Caucus. As a result, the House of Representatives may never be the same.

To understand why this is such a big deal, it's important to understand the background. Dysfunctional as Washington has become, most of the people we elect to high office are smart, diligent, and well-meaning. They get into public service because, well, they want to serve the public. They endure the grueling process of raising money and attending coffee klatches and answering questions at town hall meetings because they want to make a difference.

When they get to Washington, however, something happens. They run into the teeth of a legislative process that has long made it impossible for commonsense, bipartisan solutions to be passed into law. In the House, standing rules make it almost impossible for leaders in either party to schedule votes on bills supported by moderates on both sides of the aisle. Why? Because doing so might raise hackles among their colleagues on the far left or far right. As a result, bipartisan solutions become the most difficult to pass.

Take one obvious example—the state of the nation's infrastructure. Members on both sides of the aisle know it's abominable. You needn't fly out of any of the nation's decrepit airports more than once to realize that we're falling behind the rest of the developed world. And yet the two parties haven't been able to complete bipartisan legislation to pay for the improvements members in both parties say they want to finance.

Or take the more controversial issue of health insurance. Even the Affordable Care Act's biggest boosters will admit there are ways to improve how we cover the uninsured. At the same time, many who have voted repeatedly to repeal the Affordable Care Act have since embraced protections for those who have pre-existing conditions. Nevertheless, Republicans and Democrats have been unable to put into law sensible bipartisan reforms.

The same holds true when it comes to what may be the third rail of American politics these days—immigration and border security. And gun safety. And budget reform. And a whole host of other topics

on which neither party has all the answers but bipartisan approaches which have the support of the majority of Americans would go a long way toward solving the underlying challenge.

Here's what too few Americans realize. On many of these issues, the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus, a group that included 48 members of Congress evenly split between Democrats and Republicans in the Congress that will expire in January, has already released bipartisan fixes. They came up with a framework to improve health care, to modernize the nation's infrastructure, and even to address the immigration system and strengthen border security. But because the House rules have to date incentivized the chamber's leaders to squelch bipartisanship—because the chamber's bylaws make those who set the agenda perpetually held hostage by ideologues on the far right and far left—none of their solutions received floor consideration. None were brought up for an up-or-down vote.

That's why Pelosi's decision to embrace a series of discrete rule changes is such a big deal. After a series of negotiations, she agreed to changes suggested by nine Democratic Problem Solvers who pledged not to vote for any Speaker candidate unless he or she created real pathways for bipartisan legislation to pass. And much to Pelosi's credit, she did exactly that.

When you're a business leader, you discover that few moments are more satisfying than when you figure out a solution to a vexing problem and successfully execute it. The American people too rarely get any satisfaction from Washington because the rules governing the legislative process prevent problems from being solved. I'm proud that America still has leaders who are willing to stand up for what's right for America regardless of whether their party leaders initially support it. That's a credit to the Problem Solvers. And it's a credit to Nancy Pelosi for seeing the wisdom of their ideas.

Ron Shaich, the founder and chairman of Panera Bread, and managing partner of ActIII Holdings is a co-founder of No Labels, an organization that promotes bipartisan political problem solving and the development of a long-term strategic plan for the country.