

Part V, Chapter 3. Character

The ideal successful campaign organizer/ builder will display a wide range of human qualities, encapsulated in “character”, which make the formidable requisite tasks possible. (Mere mortals may come close): boundless energy, infectious exuberance, patience, respect, trustworthiness, and moral authority. He or she possesses a strong enough ego to challenge vested power and withstand internal controversy and stress, yet remain free of destructive egotism, which can undermine any campaign.

He or she is at least as good at listening as speaking taking pleasure in adopting the good ideas of others, putting others forward, bringing new leadership along. She or he evokes fierce loyalty and dedication through warmth, humor, joy, love, dedication to the common good, spirit (or spirituality).

Character

As we have seen, DeMarco is a man of intellectual strength and moral character. He displays a congeries of positive personal qualities that underpin his strength as a campaign leader. He is also “a character” in the less flattering sense of the word. And he has a set of idiosyncrasies that lead many of those closest to him to declare that “he drives me crazy!” – Often, but not always - with a smile.

Naturally, DeMarco’s adversaries tend not to look kindly upon him. When he first met President Miller of the Maryland Senate, with whom he had dueled at a distance in some of his early gun control campaigns, Miller greeted him with, “You’re that bomb thrower, aren’t you?!”

On a contentious talk show sometime later, two outraged callers expressed their bile: “You’re the enemy of the middle class!” erupted one; “The most dangerous man in America!” yelled another.

[Bereano interview]

Other’s take issue with his strategies. Denis McCoy, a state tobacco lobbyist challenges the fairness of DeMarco’s election campaign pledge drives,

“Until you actually see the bill,” argues McCoy, “you really can’t say that you’ll vote for that bill even though you may support the concept.”

Others point to his harsh advertisement demonizing the legislators who sought to kill the 1999 cigarette tax increase – all Republicans – as nakedly, and unfairly partisan, ignoring Democrats who voted against the bill. [DeMarco fires back, “The only people on the ads were the people who stood up and yapped. If Democrats had done it, they would have been on the ad.]

Glenn Schneider dismisses these criticisms, “The reality is that when you’re successful at doing this kind of major issue reform, you’re going to find your share of people who resent you for it. Vinny has his share of such people.”

Since we’re looking at DeMarco as a model for aspiring issue campaign leaders, we’re more interested in the complaints of those who work with him, and it is those complaints that we examine here.

Up to this last chapter, I’ve refrained from offering the reader a composite portrait of Vinny the Character, though it was tempting to do so earlier because it’s entertaining and engagingly human. But, before acquainting the reader with DeMarco through more sober accounts of his campaign leadership, I realized it would have served as a caricature that inappropriately diminished his serious purpose and achievements. Now it’s time.

DeMarco doesn’t *look* like a lobbyist, much less a politician. He’s disheveled; he’s rumped. Too many DeMarco watchers to be ignored call him a “Columbo” character, after the Peter Falk TV detective, deceptively unkempt and bumbling – though canny – TV detective.

His intrepid fellow organizer, Rosanna Miles, once told him he couldn’t show up at a press conference with his usual open-necked, short sleeve shirt. So he borrowed a white dress shirt from the dry cleaners next door to his low rent Baltimore office. She also sent him home one day to put together matching shoes.

He just doesn’t pay much attention to how he looks. Len Lucchi, his long time lobbying partner laments, “His hair is always askew. When he comes to Annapolis to lobby, the first thing I do is hand him a comb.” On the rare

occasions when he's shamed into dressing like a real lobbyist, he takes out (not quite from mothballs) the suit he was married in 18 years ago.

For years, day after day, in the lobbies of Annapolis, he wore a Winnie the Pooh tie. Former Governor Glendening, an ally, nonetheless grew so tired of that tie that he seized the occasion of a ceremony honoring DeMarco's tobacco tax campaign to present him with an elegant tie emblazoned with the seal of Maryland. So he wore that tie day in and day out until it became so grimy that Rosanna Miles made him get it cleaned.

He doesn't behave like a lobbyist; take legislators to lunch, though he brings everyone he can persuade to the Yabba Pot, his favorite Caribbean vegan café down the street from his office, recommending the barbecued tofu ribs. His favorite foods are hot chocolate with soy milk, vegetable sushi, and miso soup. An earthy labor leader ally once joined in an affectionate roast of DeMarco, "Wow, an Italian that is a Quaker that doesn't smoke or drink or eat meat or swear. Who the hell is this guy?!"

Unlike tobacco lobbyist Bruce Bereano, who lives high, DeMarco lives and works simply. His office doesn't look like a lobbyist's office. The office is spare, for a long time furnished in second hand utilitarian. He once found two office chairs discarded on the street down the block and proudly brought them in. When a group of fond and inspired, but aching, interns left, they chipped in and bought a brand new office chair and formally presented it as their parting gift.

He's not *organized* like a lobbyist. Indeed, he's utterly disorganized and hopelessly technology challenged. Lucchi: "He uses a tourist bag instead of a brief case, so every paper he hands to someone is always dog-eared. His staff tries to keep handouts away from him and in file folders."

Matt Celentano, for many years a member of the close DeMarco team vents:

He's always losing stuff. He steals constant office supplies. So we have to hide them from him, it's unbelievable. Rosanna probably has a stash in here somewhere. His glasses, though, are the worst thing. He has 5 or 6 pair in the office, and he still can't find them. And when he does, they're generally broken, and he wears them broken!

Vinny will over to the copier, and just tear it up. He's hollering and screaming 'what's wrong with this machine?! He gets just like a little child, having a tantrum.

He cannot sit still. Celentano: "I can't stand Vinny DeMarco press conference days. Vinny can be at his most annoying, He just gets so excited and so fired up, he can't even think. He cannot remain still without a real goal for more than 2 minutes. Uncertainty drives him crazy. He doesn't know what to focus on."

Rosanna Miles says when DeMarco's all wound up, he reminds her of the Energizer Bunny [Name]

He's not much of a manager. Rosanna Miles relates her utter confusion upon reporting for her first job with DeMarco, in 1997, in the cigarette tax campaign. DeMarco had never told her exactly what the job was – and never would. She asked the only other employee hired before her, who responded, "I have no idea, either." She would learn only as DeMarco gave her one task after another.

Glenn Schneider was being hired, shortly thereafter, having being used to the clear rules of the state health department and The Medical Society, where he had worked before. He asked DeMarco what vacation time came with the job. "Whenever you feel you need a vacation," was the answer. What about sick leave? "Whenever you're sick, or there's sickness in the family." And that's how it was.

DeMarco's wife, with a warm and tolerant laugh, reacts: You've heard people say he drives them crazy? He drives *everybody* crazy, He's so disorganized – but the amazing thing is that it doesn't interfere with his getting things *done*."

He drives even his fondest colleagues crazy with his *communications madness*. Celentano is just getting wound up:

He has to be in constant communication, and if he's not, he gets all flustered. When I first got here, he was all pager. He would get paged and he would scream and run away, and you wouldn't know what he was going for. Then he went to blackberry, which he proceeded to destroy, because he did

about sixteen hundred one word emails a day on it. They're completely useless. Then he went to this cell phone. Now he has currently, and will, routinely, be answering the cell phone while on the work phone at the same time and have a call waiting, and he tries to do all three at once."

Len Lucchi offers his desperate solution to the flood, "The only way I can make sure that my blackberry does not fill up on emails is to have him at my side so he can't send any; ditto, for voicemails."

Eric Gally offers another solution: Eric Gally: People will yell, 'Look, its Vinny, again! Who wants to talk to Vinny?!' I'm sure some people give their phone to their kids and let him talk to them."

Patricia Sosa has a name for this, "I tease people every time they give Vinny their email. I say, you don't know what you've done. Your life will never be the same. He's Vinny the nudge - *the nudge extraordinaire.*"

Even his son Tony complains, "My father is an obsessive compulsive - He calls me on my cell phone Monday, and asks, "What are your plans for next weekend? I'm a kid. I don't know what I'm doing *tomorrow* - how do I know what I'm doing next week?!"

A Reckless Optimist. DeMarco's visions of the attainable sometimes flummox his colleagues – such as announcing a large media event with no conceivable time to allow the work to organize the meeting, or publicly embracing, without contemplating the odds the impossible target of 2000 groups to sign the first health care resolution when the largest number of signers in any previous campaign never exceeded 400 groups. Hence, Matt Celentano's label, "Reckless Optimist."

He's not cool like a lobbyist – Like Len Lucchi. His exuberance bubbles over.

[Matt and Len Lucchi describing him with legislators] they run.

Lucchi adds, "In college and grad school, folks thought he had a problem with alcohol at parties even though he has never imbibed an ounce, just because he was so exuberant.

[Lucchi – drove Bernie – as night owl - crazy when they were roommates at Hopkins, waking up at the crack of dawn singing operatic arias.

It wasn't simply the exuberance of youth. Thirty years [?] later, Mitchell told me she was having a

For perhaps too many devoted cause lobbyists, family needs come *second*; Not for DeMarco. When his son Tony has a baseball game to play; or son Jamie is acting in a school play, he'll duck out of an important Senate hearing to make sure he gets to the game or play on time.

He's too loyal. For the most effective lobbyists, a rule of thumb is, "No permanent friends; no permanent enemies." DeMarco, as we have seen, takes great pains to avoid making permanent enemies. But DeMarco is loyal to his friends; perhaps *too* loyal.

DeMarco reflexibly turns to old friends and colleagues for such central campaign chores as paid advertising and polling. Rosanna Miles expresses frustration with DeMarco's tolerance of some of these friends and old allies who – in Glenn and her judgment didn't deserve it:

He's very, very loyal. Glenn and I would say to him about a friend who has persuaded DeMarco to follow a wrong-headed strategy or tactic, "This person is not showing that he is on our side, and you can't continue to go in that direction no matter what the person has done for you before. No, you can't do it that way – you've got to change.

With persons that he cares about, he will go his distance with and not question it. It is enough that the person is a friend.

He Shrinks from Confrontation. Similarly, his closest co-workers fault him for his un-willingness to confront bad behavior: Matt Celentano:

Vinny doesn't want to say anything bad about anybody. I really believe that some of these people don't care about any of these issues. They just care about the next election, and I don't like, I don't like them to get away with that. But there are some hacks down there in Annapolis that only care about getting their names in the paper.

Bishop Miles notes, “He’s not a confrontational man. I think sometimes in some ways that hinders his efforts.”

He’s too stubborn; too quick to compromise. A very good lobbyist, like a very good card player, knows “when to hold and when to fold.” Sometimes, DeMarco is too stubborn; sometimes he is too quick to compromise. Both qualities sometimes infuriate his colleagues.

We’ve seen examples of both. For stubbornness, all three of his closest office colleagues cite one maddening illustration: As DeMarco narrowed his campaign focus in 2005 to the newly conceived and narrowly targeted Fair Share bill in the wake of the devastating loss in the last hours of the 2004 legislative session, he determined *not* to have his legislative allies introduce – to keep alive – the coalition’s comprehensive Health Care for All Bill. His colleagues were outraged:

As for a hasty, excessive compromise, they cite DeMarco’s response to the threat of the military contractor Northrop-Grumman to oppose the Fair Share bill because, through a fluke in drafting, the bill would have imposed *unfair* requirements on Northrop-Grumman whose health care contributions were exemplary. DeMarco, fearing that Northrop-Grumman’s opposition would doom the bill, decided that the company had to be exempted *by name* from the bill.

Len Lucchi echoes DeMarco’s stubbornness, “Once he gets something into his head, it’s pretty hard to convince him that he’s wrong. He has a kind of stubbornness, hanging onto things. Sure my role is Vinny’s lobbyist. But my role is also therapist - primarily to Vinny - but often to some of the people that Vinny leaves in his wake.”

The Mirror of his strengths

What are we to make of this litany of complaints – not from DeMarco’s adversaries, but from those closest to him? The answer, I suggest, lies in the reflections of those very friends and colleagues – these annoying, sometimes maddening idiosyncrasies, they acknowledge, are for the most part the tolerable excesses of the very qualities that lead to DeMarco’s success as a campaign leader, and only minimally detract from his leadership.

How Off-putting is DeMarco's Dishabille?

Of the oft told tale of Governor Glendening's ostentatious theatrical presentation to DeMarco of a decent tie, in commemoration of his leadership on the tobacco tax hike [?], the Methodist advocate Sandra Ferguson, notes:

Governor Glendening gave him a tie, and it was a big joke - no it was a sincere gift. But everyone in the room laughed because everyone knows about his ties and how he spills food on them. He's not the sharpest dresser on the block. But for someone like a governor to even acknowledge that and recognize it and feel comfortable and actually being able to present that to him in the vein that he did says something about Vinny - it's the way people react to him people from all walks of life, from the poorest of the poor or some of the most powerful ...

In other words, DeMarco's unconcern with how he looks is disarming. As Karla Sneegas says not in admiration of his attire, but of his overall presence, "I would like to be Vinny when I grow up. That's the way I feel like when I'm around him - because of the way he can pull people together and just do it so, so, so non-threatening."

Kathleen Townsend agrees:

He laughs, he smiles, he's humble - at least he appears that way. He opens himself in. He has his funny parts. But he doesn't intimidate you or think he's better than you. He's not drinking coffee; he's not eating meat; he's you know, a little bedraggled at times. I don't know how he reacts with men, but maybe as a mother, you want to take care of him.

And Maryland House Environmental Affairs Committee Chair puts DeMarco's non-existent dress code in perspective:

Well, we're all Vinny crazy - not all, but many of us. He's just endearing. Look, when Bruce Bereano comes into my office, like many other lobbyists, they've got a client, they get to know their client, they get to know the issue, they're smart. They really are smart, very bright people. They come in. They say, "Here's the issue,

here's the client, here's what we need." or "Here's the bill, and can you help us here?" it's a one-time strategy Then out the door they go.

Vinny deals with the kinds of issues and policies that require long term perseverance, strategy and education. And so Vinny doesn't walk in the door and say, slam, bang, thank you ma'am. Each of his endeavors represents a very methodical, carefully thought through strategy that involves public education, as well as education of the members. How he dresses really doesn't matter.

Nervous energy *is* energy

The impatience, restlessness, relentlessness, pushiness, "nudge extraordinaire," Fatchtoas? t, Chutzpa - all the adjectives that annoy, sometimes craze DeMarco's friends and colleagues reflect the boundless energy that is so essential to DeMarco's follow-up to every commitment, his emails, calls, Blackberry outreach and touching of every ally, every journalist within reach, everyone who he has asked or tasked, every bruised ego or itch waiting to be scratched.

As Molly Mitchell says, "Once he has figured out the way to do it, then he's completely full steam ahead!" And full steam ahead is how he gets things done."

This is why, fellow health lobbyist Eric Gally is able to report:

I get flagged down in the hallways of Annapolis, and legislators say, "Tell him to stop getting so many people to call. The phone's ringing off the hook. I hear stories of legislators getting 400 500, 600 emails and phone calls. ..These are. Real people – real people who live in the districts of the legislators they are calling."

And this is why Sosa insists, "Of all the assets that Vinny brings to the table, his discipline on the follow up is key. Because it reinforces; you do something, he will reply. He will do exactly what he said he was going to do. The follow up is so impeccable that people feel really rewarded. That's really valuable."

Is he too loyal to people who don't deserve it?

Loyalty is highly sought, but dubious virtue in politics. So it can also be in issue campaigning. But it is also the mark of a good leader, as we have noted, that they find those who can do needed tasks better than they, and they stick with those that produce results time after time. So it has been with such DeMarco stalwarts as Bernie Horn for creative advertising and Len Lucchi for lobbying, Mike Pretl for legal counsel, and others in these and other cases DeMarco's loyalty has been well earned, and an index of another leadership quality: the ability to delegate.

DeMarco ponders the complaint that his loyalty may at times out run his judgment: "This may be true. In 1992, I had this great vision, "Bill Clinton would be President from 1992-2000; Al Gore, from 2000 – 2008; *and Hillary Clinton would be President from 2008-2016.*"

He supported Hillary Clinton to the very end of her campaign, though much of that campaign troubled him. "Maybe I stayed loyal a little too long."

Stubbornness? Or a healthy ego?

A campaign leader needs a strong ego. A Leader's ability and willingness to traverse the shoals of conflicting counsel, and to set a strategic course informed by both campaign tested judgment and intelligence from the legislative battlefield *requires* a strong ego.

This necessarily means that once the leader sets such a course, he or she is not readily inclined to alter course.

This doesn't mean that the leader will not listen – as DeMarco did indeed listen to the anguished pleas of his colleagues on the two issue we have examined where he *stubbornly* resisted their arguments on the brink of the 2005 Fair Share bill campaign: his readiness to exempt the major employer Northrop-Grumman from the Fair Share Bill, and his insistence that the campaign withhold re-introduction of the comprehensive Health Care For All bill because introduction of the bill might undermine support for the Fair Share bill.

He **did** listen. He did not tell his colleagues to desist. Though he did pout. Ultimately he found an acceptable compromise on the exemption for Northrop-Grumman (Thanks to son Tony), and gave in, mostly, to the pleas for reintroduction of the Health Care for All Bill.

His hanging on to his determination to exempt Northrop-Grumman was also a reflection of another strength; DeMarco's intensive focus on his current objective, in this case, passage of the Fair Share Law, because he fear that if political powerful Northrop-Grumman opposed the bill. "We'd be dead." The same was true with his initial unwillingness to have the comprehensive Health Care for All bill introduced alongside the Fair Share Bill

But in each case, one of DeMarco's leadership strengths, *focus* on short term objectives was at odds with another, perhaps more fundamental strategic strength: making certain that short-term objectives are incremental steps toward the long term goals, not a detour or later stumbling block in the reach toward those goals.

Demarco lost the argument, and gave in to his colleagues. No one was made to feel out-of-line in arguing strenuously with DeMarco. He was not angry, or defiant. Just stubborn. And, indeed, it was he who ended up feeling sheepish, hanging his head.

As Bishop Miles avers:

He has a strong ego, but he's not egotistic. It's a healthy ego. He knows who he is and he doesn't go into the public arena looking to be liked. He gets his warm fuzzies from his family and intimate circle of friends. So he's free to be who he needs to be in the political arena.

He's a schmoozer, and he seeks consensus. But when he's very sure that his approach is the approach that needs to be taken, he doesn't back off.

And others note that his devotion to his family keeps him centered. Matt Celentano describes one illustrative incident:

Perfect example; we're in Annapolis, at a House Government Operations committee hearing. The chairman had personally requested that Vinny come testify on this bill. It's three o'clock and we've been sitting there for 2 hours, and Vinny leans over to Glenn and me and says, "I'm outta here. I've got Tony's soccer game. "

Glenn and I looked at him like are you kidding? Are you out of your mind? The chairman *asked* you to come speak. You're not going anywhere. And you could tell he was upset that he had to stay. But that's how he is with those kids and Molly, they come first.

Confrontation Averse?

As with other seeming personal idiosyncrasies, there's method in DeMarco's reluctance to confront those who oppose him. Maggie McIntosh, as a legislator well understands, "He's not confrontational with people that he knows he needs on his side. So he's not going to be confrontational with people like Mike Miller. He's that's really because he's focused on how to get the job done, not because he's afraid of confrontation. That's another mistake a lot of people make, though, is they are confrontational with people that they need.

He also doesn't take opposition personally, as Methodist policy advocate Sandra Ferguson observes, "He doesn't hold grudges because he's so focused on the issues. He has a passion, and he doesn't deviate from that."

And, finally, Bishop Miles notes that when it is *strategically* necessary, DeMarco *will* confront, "I don't think he's averse to confrontation. He will try to work around difference; he will try to see how we can work together. But when it comes down to it, he'll confront!"

As he did, memorably, when he made the decision to run the attack ads in 1999 on those Senate members that filibustered final Senate approval of *any* cigarette tax increase.

"Columbo?" disorganized, absent-minded, technically challenged, distracted, vague. Really?!

Mitchell suggests why DeMarco neglects to be clear to his fellow workers exactly what it is he wants them to do:

Some of the people that worked under him felt like he just didn't give them enough direction, that they were left on their own and didn't know what they were supposed to be doing. He knows what *he's* doing and he's such a whirlwind and he thinks he can just give people

a word or two, “Do this!” and “Do that.” and they’re going to know what they have to do.

Bishop Miles talks about his first effort to introduce his wife Rosanna to DeMarco. She was distinctly unimpressed, and told her husband, “This is a very strange guy!”

I told her not to be deceived by his appearance, and his presentation, that he is an extraordinarily committed person, a very bright person, and one who knows how to get things done.

Yes, he looks like Colombo; it’s kind of a persona, but it’s not an act. What you see is what you get. I’ve never met a more authentic person. There is no pretense; there is no put on with Vinny. He does not try to impress you with what he’s attained, what he has materially, he’s just Vinny, a very compassionate, committed man.

In some areas of life, because we’ve engaged socially, he’s a very naïve person. But when it comes to the business of doing good, you don’t find a sharper mind anywhere.

One of Maryland’s leading corporate lobbyists, an ally in the tobacco wars with Bruce Bereano and against DeMarco, nonetheless grants DeMarco grudging praise, “I have never met anybody in this process who had more focus and energy on a single issue than Vinny does. Sometimes that focus and energy carry the day.”

“You’ll never want to Work With Him Again.” What never?

The “facts on the ground,” as the battlefield saying goes. Tell us otherwise. It was TFK’s Pete fisher who told me that he was warned that, “If you work with Vinny on any particular issue, you’ll most likely win, but you won’t want to work with him again.”

The laconic Fisher adds, “Not my experience.”

And it is a simple fact that *all* of those who catalogued for me DeMarco’s manifold flaws and foibles had been working with him for years and years and, as of this writing, are still doing so. One clue to the reason, is that the more outrageous the behavior they were reporting, the more they were likely

to laugh, or smile. His office mates talk of on office constantly erupting with laughter. Sometimes, DeMarco creates the laughter with a fine story telling touch. Sometimes, he's the fond butt of the laughter. But it's always there, or around the corner after the tension of the moment.

There is in the words and affect – and even, tears – of these closest colleagues an unabashed love for their idiosyncratic boss.

These complex feelings are perhaps best summed up in this spontaneous email Rosanna Miles sent Vinny in midst of a typically stressful campaign day:

Just to let you know that I thank you for all that you do. Even when you make me feel like a slave, you get the job done. Anyway I personally wanted you to know that I thank you and I love you too. Have a nice day.

Celentano, perhaps the most critical of Demarco's office team nonetheless affirms the joys and rewards of the working relationships:

I really like working here for lots and lots of different reasons. You really feel that in this small, *tiny* office, you can actually effect lots of change. Plus, I'm pretty passionate about the health care issues. And at this point, I know how Vinny works, and it's just a matter of kind of managing him – I hate to use that word, it's not my favorite word to use. I just know how to deal with him, how to make the best use of his energies. And a lot of the stuff we get to do is really fun.

Well, the core of us have been together so long it's like a family, where somebody might make you really angry but that doesn't mean you don't still love him.

Exuberant to a Fault?

The Johns Hopkins psychologist, Kay Jamison, celebrates the importance to society of "Exuberance" in her book of the same name:

Exuberance is an abounding, ebullient, effervescent emotion. It is kinetic, unrestrained, joyful, irrepressible. It is not happiness, although they share a border. It is instead that, at its core, a more

restless, billowing state. Certainly it is no lulling sense of contentment: exuberance leaps, bubbles, and overflows, propels his energy through troop and tribe. It spreads upward and outward like pollen toted by dancing bees and in this carrying ideas are moved and actions taken.

We can sum up much of what we have heard extolling DeMarco's energy, infectiousness, follow-up and much of what we have heard of his idiosyncrasies as the products of just such exuberance. But Len Lucchi, with permission, illustrates, the extreme, the personal impact of DeMarco's exuberance:

It just spreads to other people. It's infectious. I'll give you an extreme example. My father was in the hospital on his last legs. We had instructed them to stop any kind of hydration or nutrition. He was just lying there. My mother and I were just waiting for him to expire. And Vinny walks in and my dad pops up and starts talking Italian to him. That was the damndest thing! It was incredible.

“Reckless Optimism” or Realistic hope?

“Vinny,” says his young and iconoclastic team member, Matt Celentano, “is a “reckless optimist.”

How reckless? Bernie Horn recalls DeMarco's determination as a leader of the Maryland Young Democrats in 1987 to launch the legislative campaign to ban the Saturday Night Special handguns:

He said, “We're going to introduce a bill to ban Saturday night specials. And I probably said these very words: “You're crazy.”

Nationally, nobody had passed any gun control legislation on the state or federal level for a decade. By 1987, deep into the Reagan years, it was perceived politically impossible. There were all these awful things happening at the congressional level... Overall guns seemed impossible.

So with the rest of us dragging our feet, he pulled us into this thing. It was quite a process through the summer to write a bill.

Then the miraculous thing happened, he passed it

We've seen Glenn Schneider convinced that DeMarco had taken leave of his senses in asserting to the Smoke Free Maryland Board on their very first meeting he could raise large sums of political funding to fuel an election-centered campaign in 1997 to raise the cigarette tax.

“People started asking questions” about where the money would come from, Schneider recalls. He remembers saying to himself, “This is a great mistake to end this way. Why did he do this? Why did he come up with such an unrealistic proposal? There's no way in the world we can raise that kind of money.”

After DeMarco left, Schneider remembers, “everyone said, ‘Can you believe this guy?’”

He raised the money.

Even Celentano's reproach was spoken more in awe than criticism. In the same breath he marvels at the power of DeMarco's vision. The full quote:

One thing that always blows me away is what I call reckless optimism. Perfect example is this year [2007], about ten days from the end of the session and our elected friends were telling us that there was no chance the cigarette tax/Medicaid expansion bill was going to pass. The next day we are at the office and Vinny is doing radio interviews saying anything can happen in the last days....Anything. He *really* believed it as well. It just blew me away. That is one thing that I have never seen out in any person in my entire life. If he had any clue or care about sports whatsoever, I think he could be Vince Lombardi. [One of the he winningest football coaches in history].

And DeMarco's optimism was validated – if not in April, then by November, in the 2007 special session.

Perhaps not reckless, but more a hopeful realist, as the great social psychologist Eric Fromm defined such hope in his book, *The Revolution of Hope*:

While passive waiting is a disguised form of hopelessness and impotence, there is another form of hopelessness and despair which takes exactly the opposite disguise – the disguise of phrase making and adventurism, of disregard for reality, and of forcing what cannot be forced.

Realistic hope, writes Fromm, “is neither passive waiting nor is it unrealistic forcing of circumstances that cannot occur. It is like the crouched tiger, which will jump only when the moment for jumping has come.”

When DeMarco took on the leadership of the Health Care for All campaign, Horn – the consummate pragmatist – was skeptical:

In his campaigns, DeMarco is almost always the crouched tiger with an unclouded view of the possible.

Something Else

Affection may well be part of the bond between DeMarco and his co-workers, but there is something else at work here. His more secular colleagues call it “goodness” or variations thereof. His faith leader colleagues lean more to his innate spirituality. Patricia Sosa ended my questioning her with this interjection:

I want to say just one more thing: I want to share with somebody else why it’s so good to work with Vinny. One of the things I like about working with him is that he’s a very wholesome guy. And it’s really nice to see a straight shooter, wholesome person, succeed in what he does. He’s exercising power. He’s changing things, he’s making a difference. The political world is so full of two-faced, manipulative people. So it’s so refreshing to see somebody that is so honest and clear and directed, in a nice, decent way, succeed. It can be done, you can do it.

This quality is not is not a mirror of a DeMarco shortcomings, unless one takes his workmates frustrations with what they call his childlike behavior with the more respectful recognition by Bishop Miles, “Let me say he’s innocent.”

Karla Sneegas speaks of the effect DeMarco has when he brings people together of lifting their horizons to the “common good.”

It’s amazing. If you sit at the table when he brings people together, it just seems like a conversation, but there is something magical that happens, and I think part of it is his presence; it’s that Quaker convening, consensus building philosophy. A greater good is felt by everyone. In every way that he goes about mobilizing, organizing, the greater good is honored. This is very energizing and uplifting.

Perhaps this quality is not so surprising in a person who set out to be a catholic priest until a friend in the 10th grade convinced him of the irrationality of the liturgy; nor in the early and late social justice advocacy of both DeMarco and his wife Molly Mitchell, who both say their life’s direction was influenced by priests inspired by the social Gospel of Pope John II.

Now, both DeMarco and Mitchell are Quakers. They converted from Catholicism, and were married in a Quaker wedding. The Methodists’ Karen Ferguson reflects on DeMarco’s evoking his Quaker commitment:

I can’t think of any one else who, when we are sitting down for a business meal, says grace. Vinny always, always insists that we have grace, and he does a Quaker grace. When we sit and break bread together, it means more than just sitting down and eating, even if it’s business. because the content of the business is justice for all people.

One of the first things that struck me about Vinny, that brought a depth of understanding of the person was that experience with him. He has no shame and no embarrassment about, where we are, what restaurant we’re in, we do it. That doesn’t always happen in secular settings. And I think it’s just wonderful.

Jim Winkler echoes Ferguson’s appreciation:

You can tell Vinny feels comfortable working with church people. It’s amazing the number of social justice activists who don’t feel comfortable. I remember talking to a women’s leader, and she said to

me, “You know I was actually raised a Methodist. I stopped going to church in college and haven’t gone since. But now that I think about it, my roots and my understanding of where my passion for women’s rights comes from is grounded in those days.” But the idea of reaching out to or working with the Methodists wouldn’t occur to her.

Vinny may not use “god-talk,” a lot. But he’s right there with us. He’s referred to his own church on more than one occasion, and for church people, that’s important.

I asked Bishop Miles to react to my two favorite quotes about DeMarco, from volunteers who had worked with him, “Vinny is the world’s biggest pain in the ass!” and “Vinny DeMarco walks with God.”

He thought for a moment, then answered, “I think it’s a combination of the two.”

Summing up

Perhaps Matt Myers, President of the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, fairly considered the dean of tobacco control advocates, best captures the power and source of DeMarco’s strengths as a campaign leader – even with conservatives who might readily distrust him, and certainly disagree with him on as wide range of issues.

I certainly have to admit that the first couple times I met Vinny, I thought, there’s no way this guy can be in a room with conservatives, let alone conservative religious people, and not get into a war because of the strength of his progressive views on such a broad range of issues, from lifestyle to politics to social justice, and the ruffled, frenetic, slightly disheveled way he goes about life. It just didn’t fit at all.

Then you see Vinny in a room with a group of leaders who run from progressive, more modern religious leaders to the most conservative bible-reading leaders, and he moves back and forth as seamlessly as it’s possible to do - and in genuine friendship. It comes down to people trusting and having faith in him.

Vinny comes across as extraordinarily passionate, but Vinny is extraordinarily disciplined in his passion and that, I think, is ultimately critical. Vinny doesn't allow himself to get sidetracked by the issues on which he disagrees with people. He doesn't let that get in the way of his relationship with those people or in his organizing and work with those people. And it's one of the reasons I think that people trust him is because it's genuine. When Vinny sits down and works with you on an issue, he's working with you on *that* issue. It doesn't matter that he disagrees with you on 99 other issues. And it doesn't *feel* like he disagrees with you on 99 other issues.

It's discipline and it's focus, not allowing ego or other distractions, to get in the way. Vinny is capable of setting sound objective goals and working towards them and understanding what it's really all about and not letting ideology, passion, personality, get in the way. In that respect, he's the ultimate problem solver. Frankly, I think it's the best of what American political figures historically have done, and that we don't do so well any more.