

EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP is Easier Than You Think
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All the stuff I have been reading about leadership is very “interesting”. Every periodical has a new theory, a new guru professing to have the answers to our leadership void. We are told about varying leadership skills, traits, and characteristics. I, too, thought I had a pretty good handle on this leadership thing until one day someone asked a question that stopped me in my tracks.

I was conducting a breakout session at a national seminar for financial aid professionals, and while doing my best song and dance\on the platform, one of the attendees, “Anna”, asked me to explain why some leaders succeed with certain groups and fail miserably with others.

Hmmm. Good question!

I’m usually pretty quick on my feet but this question planted a seed that took some time to germinate.

Later that evening at a reception Anna cornered me and wanted to go into more depth about her situation. She related her personal leadership challenge, one that began during the dot.com boom in the mid-90’s and after many trials and tribulations evolved to her present leadership role in a Midwest financial services organization.

She described her leadership activities, all seemingly solid, but she failed with the “go-go” group in California, yet blossomed in her new role heading up a team of accountants. After we parted that evening I was stumped; same skills, same approach, different people, different results.

Little did I know that I was falling into a leadership trap that we often experience. I was trying to put a new concept into an old “paradigm”. Joel Barker has made a ton on the “paradigm” concept, but basically a paradigm is a habit, a way of viewing things and I was using tunnel vision to solve “Anna’s problem”.

For years I have been using a leadership model adapted from Ken Blanchard’s classic Situational Leadership approach. Need-Based Leadership, developed in conjunction with Bill Koeper, at the time the

Corporate Training Director at Cuna Mutual Insurance Group in Madison, moves people through 4 phases of skill development, not unlike your high school experience. Remember the feeling you had as a freshman. You were overwhelmed, afraid, insecure, confused, afraid of looking foolish, and all the while destined to make mistakes.

Then came the sophomore experience. No longer a freshman, you thought you were pretty cool. You knew the ropes, you knew your way around. In fact the definition of sophomore is “wise fool”. Sums it up nicely, don’ you think?

As you progress through Skill Specific Improvement (SSI), and each skill is a unique experience, we make a major move from the “sophomore” to the “junior” level. The “I”centric focus of Freshmen and Sophomore performance evolves into the “We” behavior for the Juniors. Juniors begin to identify with the bigger, team picture. They willingly share their knowledge as trainers and coaches. They help build the sense of team camaraderie.

Senior level performance, or Subject Matter Experts, (SME’s), presents an interesting leadership challenge. While the most skilled on a task, they often separate themselves from the rest of the staff and if not nurtured and included in team dynamics, can pass on an air of arrogance and isolation.

To move each person through the four levels require differing skill sets at each step of the model, from training for the freshman to convincing for the sophomores, to coaching for the juniors and finally mentoring for the seniors.

This was the model I shared with Anna and she just smiled in wry amusement. This was exactly her approach and even so, in one case she failed, in one case she shone. She didn’t understand why, and neither did I.

A few nights later the Anna dilemma was still on my mind as I turned on the boob tube to mind fade for awhile. Silly me! I thought an episode from the 60’s classic **Wagon Train** would do the job. Then it hit me like a ton of bricks.

Anna was a SETTLER and she will always be a SETTLER. She succeeded because she was using her settler leadership skills with her settler followers.

Anna failed on the West Coast when she tried to overlay her settler leadership tools on a band of pioneers. As I followed the episode that evening I started to put together a list of characteristics that define these two distinct groups:

Settlers

- Planned
- Organized
- Practical
- Risk adverse
- Grounded
- Factual

Pioneers

- Imaginative
- Risk Takers
- Creative
- Unsettled
- Future-oriented
- Adaptable

No wonder each group requires its own leaders, be they formal or informal. The formal leaders are the managers and supervisors, the informal leaders are often the lead workers of the team who simply rise to a leadership stature by doing what leaders do:

Leaders take you to a place you wouldn't go to on your own.

Ever wonder why “Bob” your boss, the one with vision out to the end of his nose, struggles with a team of creative, out of the box employees, who would rather bend or break the rules than live within them.

And then there is “Bruce”, the leader who doesn't even realize here is a box and scares the soup out of his team with his energy, enthusiasm, and lack of focus. They are more content to do the same 'ol, same 'ol.

So here is what we have. Bob is the settler boss trying to lead a group of Pioneers, and Bruce is the Pioneer boss who is trying to lead the team of Settlers. Can you see the disconnect?

Taking the **Wagon Train** theme one step further, in a perfect world we have pioneer leaders with pioneer followers, settler leaders with settler followers. Similar traits, characteristics, competencies create an environment of trust, comfort, and success.

I thought I had the answer until I realized that in every organization we need to have both pioneers and settlers. Pioneers push the envelope, they drive innovation and change. They challenge the status quo. Settlers are the status quo. That's what makes them settlers. They are responsible for the day to day activity that lays the foundation for any organization. They focus on policies/procedures, standards, and structure within which the rest of the work gets done.

Here's the diagnosis:

Only Pioneers= energy, excitement, and chaos

Only Settlers= structure, control, and boring

The biggest problem is that the Pioneers scare the soup out of the Settlers and the Settlers bore the heck out of the Pioneers. Each group deems the other a "challenge/problem", potential trouble and a major speed bump in life.

So how do we get these two distinctly different work groups to "play nice"?

Ward Bond had the answer. For those of you who are chronologically challenged and came along after the 60's disappeared, Ward Bond played the Wagon Master. The Wagon Master was the connection piece the person in charge of the entire expedition, the person who served as the translator between the Pioneers and the Settlers. He took the vision, the energy, and the risk taking from the Pioneers and translated it to the Settlers in words and deeds that they could identify with. Meanwhile, he took the structure, the fear, the control from the Settlers and used that as a barometer to temper the Pioneers.

Without the Wagon Master the wagon train dissolves into confusion, frustration, and anger. If this sounds like your office you may be onto something. The Wagon Master is the inter-connection point for the team. For purposes of illustration, Ward Bond was that linchpin for the wagon train. He was the person in charge, the manager. In other organizations, perhaps yours, the Wagon Master need not be a formal manager. He or she may be an informal leader who has the communication and leadership behavior that enables them to be the go-between, the trusted ally for both the Settlers and the Pioneers.

I am just beginning to work on the profile of the Wagon Master. We have a solid profile of the Pioneers and the Settlers, but with our help we can build the next installment of this story. If you know a Wagon Master, or if you have earned that title within your organization, please contact me with details.

In the next article hopefully we will have a better picture of this American Leadership saga.

Wagons Ho!!