

Nautical lessons for leadership

Mark T. Jones

Centre for Innovative Leadership Navigation (CILN), London, UK

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Extended Abstract

*The natural world and the challenges of our physical environment offer us a wealth of lessons, both in regards to survival and as a better means to understand the dangers and opportunities. Anyone who has read *The Kon-tiki Expedition: By Raft across the South Seas* (1948) by Thor Heyerdahl or *Arabian Sands* (1959) by Wilfred Thesiger will appreciate that purpose, determination and extraordinary resilience are integral to significant human achievement. In a world beset by so many challenges it is not unnatural that we look for remarkable individuals to help find solutions and a way forward. Equally the seas and oceans and our relationship to them affords us insights that serve as useful reminders both to institutions and to individuals. From our hermetically sealed offices we would do well to make ourselves aware of an environment that is so seemingly alien to most, that of navigation and seafaring. I posit that matters nautical offer us all useful pointers that can help inform our judgement, decision making and ultimately our chances of success.*

Leadership has always been about people being put to the test, this is as true of the corporate world as it is of other fields of human endeavour. As we seek to shape and nurture the young we often place them in situations that expose them to new experiences, whilst enabling them to develop new skills and aptitudes. Operation Raleigh and the Tall Ships Youth Trust are practical examples of the way in which young people are being placed in personal and group situations that enable them to grow in confidence and discover that sense of purpose that will better equip them to become responsible citizens. Chinese wisdom teaches us that; "the toughest steel is forged in the hottest furnace". In a world beset by so many challenges it is not unnatural that we look for remarkable individuals to help find solutions and a way forward. The issue of leadership and what constitutes an effective leader continues to exercise people periodically, with to date no consensus on what is required and how we go about providing a fertile environment to nurture future leaders. Whilst there may be an absence of an agreed definition as to how to provide the appropriate scaffolding that assists exceptional individuals to rise to positions where they are called upon to lead, there is at least a growing realisation in both the public and private sector that a leadership deficit exists. In acknowledging the existence of a problem, we can at least begin to explore means of addressing the issue in a logical manner. A key element of this process of defining and appraising the need is of course the unique local conditions that have shaped our understanding of leadership and the way in which leaders are viewed. History looms large in human experience and thus management theorists must be wary of thinking that simple formulae can provide solutions to what is a complex subject that is fraught with difficulties. Firstly, there needs to be a general agreement of the core qualities and expectations we have of those who might well be called upon to assume leadership roles. Equally, it is important that there is a recognition that some individuals rise from apparent obscurity by dint of their own labours and extraordinary personal qualities and may well assume leadership and shape leadership roles of their own volition or as a result of extraordinary circumstances and events.

Returning to matters nautical we would do well to explore and examine certain situations that raise questions about those charged with or thrust into leadership roles. Corporation often face extremes as diverse as the Doldrums are to the Roaring Forties. Old Salts know only too well that the first thing one must do in regard to the seas is respect them. Sadly, some in the world of business have scant regard for the vicissitudes of life. We do not have to look far to find those enterprises that have a conservative

mentality that results in corporate coast hugging, others are oblivious of or fearful of new markets and approach them as if they were the equivalent of a 'here be dragons' marked on a historical map. If we imagine the Eastman Kodak Company (Kodak to you and me) as the corporate equivalent of a vast ocean going oil tanker it would be useful to reflect on what caused it to so nearly founder and what ultimately prevented the entire vessel from being consigned to the waves. Equally much can be learnt by appreciating what enabled smaller entities such as FUJIFILM Corporation to navigate the choppy and often perilous waters with such aplomb – clues can be found in the fact that in 2014 the Corporation was named a Thomson Reuters 2014 Top 100 Global Innovator for the third year in a row. Whether we be landlubbers or not there is much that we can gain from studying leadership through the perspective of seamanship both in theory and in practice.
