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The 21 Irrefutable

Laws of Leadership

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THE LAW OF NAVIGATION

Anyone Can Steer the Ship, But It Takes a Leader to Chart the Course

IN 1911, TWO GROUPS of explorers set off on an incredible mission. Though they used different strategies and routes, the leaders of the teams had the same goal: to be the first in history to reach the South Pole. Their stories are life-and-death illustrations of the Law of Navigation.

One of the groups was led by Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen. Ironically, Amundsen had not originally intended to go to Antarctica. His desire was to be the first man to reach the North Pole. But when he discovered that Robert Peary had beaten him there, Amundsen changed his goal and headed toward the other end of the earth. North or south—he knew his planning would pay off.

AMUNDSEN CAREFULLY CHARTED HIS COURSE

Before his team ever set off, Amundsen had painstakingly planned his trip. He studied the methods of the Eskimos and other experienced Arctic travelers and determined that their best course of action

would be to transport all their equipment and supplies by dogsled. When he assembled his team, he chose expert skiers and dog handlers. His strategy was simple. The dogs would do most of the work as the group traveled fifteen to twenty miles in a six-hour period each day. That would allow both the dogs and the men plenty of time to rest each day for the following day's travel.

Amundsen's forethought and attention to detail were incredible. He located and stocked supply depots all along the route. That way they would not have to carry every bit of their supplies with them the whole trip. He also equipped his people with the best gear possible. Amundsen had carefully considered every possible aspect of the journey, thought it through, and planned accordingly. And it paid off. The worst problem they experienced on the trip was an infected tooth that one man had to have extracted.

SCOTT VIOLATED THE LAW OF NAVIGATION

The other team of men was led by Robert Falcon Scott, a British naval officer who had previously done some exploring in the Antarctic area. Scott's expedition was the antithesis of Amundsen's. Instead of using dogsleds, Scott decided to use motorized sledges and ponies. Their problems began when the motors on the sledges stopped working only five days into the trip. The ponies didn't fare well either in those frigid temperatures. When they reached the foot of the Transantarctic Mountains, all of the poor animals had to be killed. As a result, the team members themselves ended up hauling the two-hundred-pound sledges. It was arduous work.

Scott hadn't given enough attention to the team's other equipment. Their clothes were so poorly designed that all the men developed frostbite. One team member required an hour every morning just to get his boots onto his swollen, gangrenous feet. And everyone became snowblind because of the inadequate goggles Scott had supplied. On

top of everything else, the team was always low on food and water. That was also due to Scott's poor planning. The depots of supplies Scott established were inadequately stocked, too far apart, and often poorly marked, which made them very difficult to find. Because they were continually low on fuel to melt snow, everyone became dehydrated. Making things even worse was Scott's last-minute decision to take along a fifth man, even though they had prepared enough supplies only for four.

After covering a grueling eight hundred miles in ten weeks, Scott's exhausted group finally arrived at the South Pole on January 17, 1912. There they found the Norwegian flag flapping in the wind and a letter from Amundsen. The other well-led team had beaten them to their goal by more than a month!

IF YOU DON'T LIVE BY THE LAW OF NAVIGATION . . .

As bad as their trip to the Pole was, that isn't the worst part of their story. The trek back was horrific. Scott and his men were starving and suffering from scurvy. But Scott, unable to navigate to the very end, was oblivious to their plight. With time running out and desperately low on food, Scott insisted that they collect thirty pounds of geological specimens to take back—more weight to be carried by the worn-out men.

Their progress became slower and slower. One member of the party sank into a stupor and died. Another, Lawrence Oates, was in terrible shape. The former army officer, who had originally been brought along to take care of the ponies, had frostbite so severe that he had trouble going on. Because he believed he was endangering the team's survival, it's said that he purposely walked out into a blizzard to relieve the group of himself as a liability. Before he left the tent and headed out into the storm, he said, "I am just going outside; I may be some time."

Scott and his final two team members made it only a little farther north before giving up. The return trip had already taken two months, and still they were 150 miles from their base camp. There they died. We know their story only because they spent their last hours writing in their diaries. Some of Scott's last words were these:

"We shall die like gentlemen. I think this will show that the Spirit of pluck and power to endure has not passed out of our race."⁷¹ Scott had courage, but not leadership. Because he was unable to live by the Law of Navigation, he and his companions died by it.

Followers need leaders able to effectively navigate for them. When they're facing life-and-death situations, the necessity is painfully obvious. But, even when consequences aren't as serious, the need is just as great. The truth is that nearly anyone can steer the ship, but it takes a leader to chart the course. That is the Law of Navigation.

NAVIGATORS SEE THE TRIP AHEAD

General Electric chairman Jack Welch asserts, "A good leader remains focused . . . Controlling your direction is better than being controlled by it." Welch is right, but leaders who navigate do even more than control the direction in which they and their people travel. They see the whole trip in their minds before they leave the dock. They have a vision for their destination, they understand what it will take to get there, they know who they'll need on the team to be successful, and they recognize the obstacles long before they appear on the horizon. Leroy Eims, author of *Be the Leader You Were Meant to Be*, writes, "A leader is one who sees more than others see, who sees farther than others see, and who sees before others do."

The larger the organization, the more clearly the leader has to be

able to see ahead. That's true because sheer size makes midcourse corrections more difficult. And if there are errors, many more people are affected than when you're traveling alone or with only a few people. The disaster shown in the recent film *Titanic* was a good example of that kind of problem. The crew could not see far enough ahead to avoid the iceberg altogether, and they could not maneuver enough to change course once the object was spotted because of the size of the ship, the largest built at that time. The result was that more than one thousand people lost their lives.

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WHERE THE LEADER GOES . . .

First-rate navigators always have in mind that other people are depending on them and their ability to chart a good course. I read an observation by James A. Autry in *Life and Work: A Manager's Search for Meaning* that illustrates this idea. He said that occasionally you hear about the crash of four military planes flying together in a formation. The reason for the loss of all four is this: When jet fighters fly in groups of four, one pilot—the leader—designates where the team will fly. The other three planes fly on the leader's wing, watching him and following him wherever he goes. Whatever moves he makes, the rest of his team will make along with him. That's true whether he soars in the clouds or smashes into a mountaintop.

Before leaders take their people on a journey, they go through a process in order to give the trip the best chance of being a success:

NAVIGATORS DRAW ON PAST EXPERIENCE

Every past success and failure can be a source of information and wisdom—if you allow it to be. Successes teach you about yourself and

what you're capable of doing with your particular gifts and talents. Failures show what kinds of wrong assumptions you've made and where your methods are flawed. If you fail to learn from your mistakes, you're going to fail again and again. That's why effective navigators start with experience. But they certainly don't end there.

NAVIGATORS LISTEN TO WHAT OTHERS HAVE TO SAY

No matter how much you learn from the past, it will never tell you all you need to know for the present. That's why top-notch navigators gather information from many sources. They get ideas from members of their leadership team. They talk to the people in their organization to find out what's happening on the grassroots level. And they spend time with leaders from outside the organization who can mentor them.

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NAVIGATORS EXAMINE THE CONDITIONS BEFORE MAKING COMMITMENTS

I like action, and my personality prompts me to be spontaneous. On top of that, I have reliable intuition when it comes to leadership. But I'm also conscious of my responsibilities as a leader. So before I make commitments that are going to impact my people, I take stock and thoroughly think things through. Good navigators count the cost *before* making commitments for themselves and others.

NAVIGATORS MAKE SURE THEIR CONCLUSIONS REPRESENT BOTH FAITH AND FACT

Being able to navigate for others requires a leader to possess a positive attitude. You've got to have faith that you can take your people all the way. If you can't confidently make the trip in your mind, you're not

going to be able to take it in real life. On the other hand, you also have to be able to see the facts realistically. You can't minimize obstacles or rationalize your challenges. If you don't go in with your eyes wide open, you're going to get blindsided. As Bill Easum observes, "Realistic leaders are objective enough to minimize illusions. They understand that self-deception can cost them their vision." Sometimes it's difficult balancing optimism and realism, intuition and planning, faith and fact. But that's what it takes to be effective as a navigating leader.

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A LESSON IN NAVIGATION

I remember the first time I really understood the importance of the Law of Navigation. I was twenty-eight years old, and I was leading Faith Memorial in Lancaster, Ohio, my second church. Before my arrival there in 1972, the church had experienced a decade-long plateau in its growth. But by 1975, our attendance had gone from four hundred to more than one thousand. I knew we could keep growing and reach more people, but only if we built a new auditorium.

The good news was that I already had some experience in building and relocation because I had taken my first church through the process. The bad news was that the first one was really small in comparison to the second one. To give you an idea of the difference, the changing room in the nursery in Lancaster was going to be larger than the whole sanctuary in the original building of my first church!

It was going to be a multimillion-dollar project more than twenty

If the leader can't navigate the people through rough waters, he is liable to sink the ship.

times larger than my first one. But even that was not the greatest obstacle. Right before I came on board at Faith Memorial, there had been a huge battle over another building proposal, and the debate had been vocal, divisive, and bitter. For that reason, I knew that I would experience genuine opposition to my leadership for the first time. There were rough waters ahead, and if I as the leader didn't navigate us well, I could sink the ship.

CHARTING THE COURSE WITH A NAVIGATION STRATEGY

At that time I developed a strategy that I have since used repeatedly in my leadership. I wrote it as an acrostic so that I would always be able to remember it:

- Predetermine a Course of Action.
- Lay Out Your Goals.
- Adjust Your Priorities.
- Notify Key Personnel.
- Allow Time for Acceptance.
- Head into Action.
- Expect Problems.
- Always Point to the Successes.
- Daily Review Your Plan.

That became my blueprint as I prepared to navigate for my people.

Back then, I knew exactly what our course of action needed to be. If we were going to keep growing, we needed to build a new auditorium. I had looked at every possible alternative, and I knew that was our only viable solution. My goal was to design and build the facility, pay for it in ten years, and unify all the people in the process. I also

knew our biggest adjustment would come in the area of finances, since it would turn our current budget upside down.

I started preparing for the congregational meeting. I scheduled it a couple of months ahead to give me time to get everything ready. The first thing I did was direct our board members and a group of key financial leaders to conduct a twenty-year analysis of our growth and financial patterns. It covered the previous ten years and projections for the next ten years. Based on that, we determined the requirements of the facility. Then we formulated a ten-year budget that carefully explained how we would handle the financing. I also asked that all of the information we were gathering be put into a twenty-page report that I intended to give to the members of the congregation. I knew that major barriers to successful planning are fear of change, ignorance, uncertainty about the future, and lack of imagination. I was going to do everything I could to prevent those factors from hindering us.

My next step was to notify the key leaders. I started with the ones who had the most influence, meeting with them individually and sometimes in small groups. Over the course of

several weeks, I met with about a hundred leaders. I cast the vision for them and fielded their questions. And when I could sense that a person was hesitant about the project, I planned to meet individually with him again. Then I allowed time for the rest of the people to be influenced by those leaders and for acceptance to develop among the congregation.

When the time rolled around for the congregational meeting, we were ready to head into action. I took two hours to present the project to the people. I handed out my twenty-page report with the floor plans, financial analysis, and budgets. I tried to answer every question

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the people would have before they had a chance to ask it. I also asked some of the most influential people in the congregation to speak.

The secret to the Law of Navigation is preparation.

I had expected some opposition, but when I opened the floor for questions, I was shocked. There were only two questions: One person wanted to know about the placement of the building's water fountains, and the other asked about the number of rest rooms.

That was when I knew we had navigated the tricky waters successfully. When it was time for the motion asking everyone to vote, the church's most influential layperson made it. And I had arranged for the leader who had previously opposed building to second the motion. When the final count was tallied, 98 percent of the people had voted in favor.

Once we had navigated through that phase, the rest of the project wasn't difficult. I continually kept the vision in front of the people by giving them good news reports to acknowledge our successes. And I periodically reviewed our plans and their results to make sure we were on track. The course had been charted. All we had to do was steer the ship.

That was a wonderful learning experience for me. Above everything else I found out that the secret to the Law of Navigation is preparation. When you prepare well, you convey confidence and trust to the people.

Lack of preparation has the opposite effect. You see, it's not the size of the project that determines its acceptance, support, and success. It's the size of the leader. That's why I say that anyone can *steer* the ship, but it takes a leader to chart the course. Leaders who are good navigators are capable of taking their people just about anywhere.

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THE LAW OF E. F. HUTTON

When the Real Leader Speaks, People Listen

YOUNG, INEXPERIENCED LEADERS often walk confidently into a room full of people only to discover that they have totally misjudged the leadership dynamics of the situation. I know that's happened to me! But when it did, it usually didn't take me very long to recognize my blunder. That was the case when I presided over my very first board meeting as a young leader. It occurred in my first church I led in rural Indiana, right after I graduated from college at age twenty-two. I hadn't been at the church for much more than a month, and I was leading a group of people whose average age was about fifty. Most of the people in the meeting had been at that church longer than I'd been alive.

I went into the meeting with no preconceptions, no agenda—no clue. I figured that I was the appointed leader and just assured everyone would follow me because of that. With all the wisdom and knowledge of my two decades of life experience, I opened the meeting and asked whether anyone had an issue to discuss.

There was a brief pause as I looked around the table, and then