



Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind

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This leadership metaphor about the nature of trust comes from the sport of sailing. I am not a sailor myself, but it is easy to observe the difference between sailing into the wind and sailing downwind. In fact, you can do either, but the techniques, effort, and results are dramatically different. Here is a list of some distinctions.

When sailing upwind, the only way to make forward progress is to “tack,” not going directly into the wind, but at a slight angle, so only part of your velocity vector is actually in the direction you wish to go. The boat goes back and forth across the water making steady, albeit very slow, progress toward your goal. Tacking is not only difficult physically, but it requires great skill and knowledge. When tacking, the crew is forced to sit grouped together along the rail, providing needed weight to counteract the heeling force of the wind against the sails, and often getting soaked in the process. World class racing sailors will tell you that in order to be a winner, you need to be nearly perfect with all decisions and actions while tacking.

If tacking is slow and a lot of work, sailing downwind is the opposite. Here the wind is pushing the boat in the direction you already want to go. The crew is sitting more comfortably on deck enjoying a drier ride with the boat more flat. Your speed toward the goal, in all but the lightest winds, is many times faster than it was when tacking, because your entire velocity vector aligned with your direction, and you cover much less distance in total. Greater speed and shorter distance equal faster realization of the goal. If the goal for your organization is outstanding performance, then getting there faster with less effort and cost is crucial.

The best leaders have found a way to configure their world so that they get to sail downwind most of the time. Sure, there are times when they need to tack for a while, but 90% of the time they are steering their ship and sailing downwind. That may sound impossible, but leaders who know how to build trust are able to accomplish this feat daily.

The “wind” in my analogy is trust. If you have a culture of high trust, you are going downwind most of the time. Everything becomes easier, faster, and less taxing. In low trust environments, leaders are forced to go upwind. This means a constant scramble to achieve productivity by exhortation or coercion rather than true motivation. Damage control is the habitual topic rather than praise for the realization of aggressive goals.

The alignment of your destination relative to the prevailing winds depends on how well you have mastered the ability to generate and maintain trust within your organization. When trust is high, leadership is enlightened – and the reverse is equally true. Understanding the nature of trust as the driving force for good leadership leads

directly to a profound theory of how to leverage that knowledge to make leadership easy rather than difficult.

Good leadership is easier than poor leadership

Everyone knows that good leadership leads to superior results. Unfortunately, many people believe that the leadership in their organization is marginal at best. They also believe that being a “good” leader is more difficult than being a poor leader. Actually the opposite is true. Along with better performance and lower stress at work, outstanding leaders have more fun, make more money, achieve a better balance in their lives, and live longer than marginal leaders.

So why doesn’t every leader want to become one of the so-called “good” ones? In fact, all leaders want this, but they believe greatness is difficult to obtain for a variety of reasons. Here are a few:

- People look up to the great leaders in history as icons of success through incredible sacrifice and discipline. Their level of personal commitment strains our current boundaries of credibility. Who among us is willing to die for the cause or to prove their heroism?
- Many people still believe in natural leadership. If you don’t have certain traits in your DNA, it is not possible to excel at the characteristics necessary to become a great leader.
- The odds are against any particular individual, since good leadership is so rare. If only one in a thousand is outstanding, what are your chances?
- Great leadership seems to require nearly infinite knowledge and skill. The complexity of variables, especially in the hyper-charged environment of the 21st century, is pretty scary if your idea of good leadership is doing everything right.
- If you attempt to develop an empowered culture and fail, you have anarchy or chaos. There is no way to regain control, and failure creates a real mess that can last for years.
- The weight of responsibility can be scary as well. Everyone in the organization looks to you for their future security. If you fail due to inadequate leadership, you will let everyone down.

By focusing on building an environment of trust, leaders are not anchored to these old paradigms. They realize the method of building trust is pretty basic. It centers on reinforcing candor and acting consistently with what people hear them say. If properly understood and applied, these ideas can take a lot of pressure and drudgery out of the practice of leadership. They allow the leader to sail downwind most of the time, and the

organization prospers as a result. Application of these ideas also leads to lower burnout and turnover for the leader and the rest of the organization.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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