

In a previous life, in another corner of the country, I climbed mountains and navigated rivers for a living. This did not happen by accident. My decision to circumnavigate the conventional post-college career route was executed with a consciousness equal to that of eating or drinking, yet the unconsciousness associated with breathing. It seemed oddly natural to abandon my best-laid plans of law school by trading those fantasies for the raw reality of rocks and water and living in a Volkswagen van. Perhaps I was not as much choosing one thing as I was rejecting another. Regardless of the means by which I arrived in Buena Vista, Colorado, I stayed for nearly eight years. This was because I had discovered that wonderful place where my gifts met a need in that small, rural town. And it was in that place that I learned how to lead and co-construct a thriving intentional community – one where we were “continually expanding [our] capacity to create [our] future” (Senge, 1994, p.14). By that definition, our community was the epitome of a learning organization (Senge, 1994). In my time there, I learned that the means by which I desire to lead in a learning organization revolves around a strong dedication to the disciplines of shared vision, personal mastery and working with mental models to create an alternative to the stagnant reality in which we so often live. Furthermore, I discovered that all of the aforementioned disciplines must be exercised in the context of relationships, and therefore must be relational in nature.

The aforementioned learning organization was comprised primarily of college students seeking to “sew their wild oats” before taking on careers in medicine, law, education or the arts. Many of these individuals hailed from the finest colleges and universities in the country, but shed the mantle of privilege each summer to live and work together with humility and intentionality. In this sense, we were not just an organization - we were also a community. It was a community with a very high collective IQ. It was also a community with a high collective emotional

intelligence. Sincerity and thoughtfulness abounded. Truly, I lived amongst some of the best “question-askers” on either side of the Mississippi.

Based on this description, one might conclude that all 135 members of this community lived on the shores of Walden Pond, daily waxing eloquent about the merits of transcendentalism. In reality, we lived not on the shores of a pond but rather on the banks of a river. And not unlike Thoreau, we were daily afforded the opportunity to row boats on rippling waters in the heat of the summer. At the heart of our community was a shared vision (Senge, 1994) that provided cohesion and coherence when the disparate recreational activities provided by our organization and the multitudes of people whom we served threatened to throw us from our ideological moorings. At the center of this shared vision was the necessity of relational interdependence as a catalyst for individual and corporate growth. This relational emphasis pervaded every aspect of our organization, and would one day take center stage in one of my most trying moments of leadership.

To be more specific, we worked for the largest whitewater rafting and mountaineering company in the state of Colorado. We served more than 30,000 people annually between the months of May and August and treated each individual to ten miles of the most exciting, wild whitewater in the country. Many of the guests who rafted with us were often doing so because of our myriad partnerships with nearby camps, high schools and universities. It was rather common to paddle with a group of Boy Scouts in the morning and in the afternoon maneuver the river canyon with a group of college students participating in a summer academic course.

As guides, it was easy to get excited about the perceived strength of your paddle crew. Conversely, it was also easy to be discouraged by a less-than-desirable assignment. For example, most guides far preferred college boys to teenage girls, not simply because of the latter

group's preference for the word "like" but also because of their differences in outright physical strength. A hierarchy of paddle crew preference was clear, with the most desirable of groups being the ever-coveted cadets from the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. And one morning in June, as the water on the river raged and crested at near-high levels, I had the privilege of leading six guides and six boat-loads of cadets on a trip through Brown's Canyon on the Arkansas River. The cadets were accompanied by a number of Air Force officers.

At our organization, each voyage down the river was lead by a "Trip Leader". On the day that the cadets and officers arrived, I had been assigned to fill that role. As the Trip Leader, it was my job to do three very specific things. First, I was responsible for appropriately dividing out the cadets and officers into groups, as well as assigning them to one of the six guides. Second, it was my job to monitor the trip from my boat at the back of the "pod" (the term used for the six boats that would travel together down the river that day) and ensure proper risk management protocol was observed. Finally, it was my unique responsibility to manage, organize and oversee emergency procedures in the event of an incident or accident on the river.

As we put on the water that day, we were not expecting anything out of the ordinary, considering the physical strength and discipline of our charges. However, the conclusion that strength and discipline in a paddle crew guaranteed safe passage on the river was simply a mental model (Senge, 1994) derived from generalizations and stereotypes. Indeed, such characteristics warded off disasters no more than knocking on wood or throwing salt over one's shoulder. Nonetheless, we pushed off from shore supremely confident in our safe return.

My close friend, Jake, helmed the first boat in our group. We had trained together in prior years, and Jake had proven himself as a very capable river guide. For this reason, I had chosen him to be our lead boat. Jake would set the lines and routes that we would all be

following for the duration of the trip. This job was accompanied by serious responsibility, since any mistake would have a domino-like effect that could have calamitous consequences for all the boats behind him.

The initial five miles of our ten-mile trip went very smoothly, and as the six boats entered the first significant Class III rapid at mile six, there was no hint that trouble lie ahead. As the group dropped into “Pinball” (arguably the most formidable river rapid of the day), I watched as the unpredictable occurred. Jake, the experienced guide whom I had deemed the best fit to set our lines, and his boat were rocked by a large wave reflecting off of the left shoreline. In an instant, his boat and all of its passengers were upside-down in the tumult and froth of some of the most treacherous whitewater in Colorado.

As an aside, it is important to note that the water in the Arkansas River is exceptionally cold in June. The water is simply snowmelt from mountains in the nearby San Isabel National Forest, whose 14,000 foot tall snowcapped peaks can be seen just three miles away. As a result, the water is warmed just to the point of melting and has very little time to increase in temperature over such a short distance. For this reason, cold-water-immersion injuries are common, and death is possible for those whose hearts cannot handle the temperature shock. Additionally, the Arkansas River is well known for the dangers presented by “sleeping” rocks (those that lie just below the surface, nearly invisible), which include foot and full body entrapment. For these reasons, keeping guests inside of boats is critical.

As the cadets and officers tumbled out of Jake’s boat, I immediately blew my whistle and indicated to the rest of the guides that we would be executing a rescue operation. Paddle crews pressed through mid-river standing waves to catch up to the scared cadets; coiled ropes hauled in shivering officers. I watched as Jake scrambled to the top of his overturned raft and maneuvered

it to shore. The end of the ordeal came quickly, yet it also marked the beginning of a difficult decision making process that tested the strength and health of our learning organization, the shared vision to which were committed, and also threatened to sew seeds of future organizational disability and instability (Senge, 1994) in the fertile soil of our learning community. Additionally, the means by which I would handle this circumstance would come to define my leadership style in a very powerful and memorable way.

As the entire group gathered its gear and composure on the banks of the river immediately following the incident, it felt as though I had been placed under a microscope; my leadership and decision-making were suddenly being magnified for the purpose of critical inspection. In that moment, I was forced to answer this question: How do I lead in a learning organization? To be sure, I had the unique opportunity to elevate myself for the purpose of self-glorification. I could have put Jake in his place by taking all of his weary, wounded and skeptical passengers into the safety of my own boat. This would have forced him to row the remainder of the canyon alone, figuratively banishing him to a sort of “river guide exile.” As Block (2009) describes, this sort of leadership is indicative of a “stuck community” (p.38), wherein fear and fault are cultivated for personal gain. In this sort of community, “most of the energy goes into finding who [is] to blame” (Block, 2009, p.38). This is certainly not the type of learning organization we desired to be. Along similar lines, a second option involved condemning Jake by abandoning the remainder of the trip and evacuating the entire group on land, a decision that the cadets not only supported, but also initiated. Both options demanded little of me as a leader while concurrently feeding my ego by clothing me in the purple cloak of a savior. Both options directly challenged the aforementioned principle of healthy, interdependent relationships that constituted our shared vision for community. Additionally, both options

betrayed the value of personal mastery (Senge, 1994) that the organization had worked so hard to infuse into our culture.

From the beginning of our training, each of us had been impregnated with the idea that leadership was as much about following as it was about being followed. Looking at ourselves in this way allowed for a unique organizational identity to grow, one wherein every employee was indeed a leader worthy of being followed. This, in turn, made organizational introspection and “learningful conversations” (Senge, 1994, p.9) more likely to occur, insofar as egoistic barriers encouraged by self-image-preservation were discouraged. In this sense, most of us saw each other as co-teachers and co-learners. A stereotypical, top-down hierarchy had been replaced by a model that encouraged equality amongst a team of leader-followers. For all of these reasons, we were the epitome of a learning organization – our capacity to create something new was ever-growing and our ambitions as a group were, therefore, free to continually expand (Senge, 1994).

This shift away from egoistic self-preservation to open transparency, inquiry and honest introspection was due in part to an organization-wide commitment to “the discipline of personal growth and learning” (Senge, 1994, p.141). also known as personal mastery. Insofar as each of us could trust one another’s commitment to ongoing learning, a feeling of mutual dependency was engendered. This coupled perfectly with our shared vision of healthy, interdependent relationships. We felt that our success as individuals was both co-dependent with, and contingent on, the success of the community as a whole. Therefore, personal mastery had become an essential component of our leader-follower paradigm. With an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between organizational learning and personal mastery (Senge, 1994), we transcended the all-too-common selfishness present in so many learning organizations and traded it for a healthy dependency and reliance on community members. It is for this reason that

“throwing Jake under the bus” because of personal gain or ease of decision-making was not an option. If our shared vision, leader-follower mental model and dedication to personal mastery were to be honored, adopting the cadets from Jake’s boat or ending the rafting trip altogether would not do. A third, counterintuitive option therefore became the imperative.

As the huddled-mass of cadets, officers and guides stood on the banks of the Arkansas that day in June, it became abundantly clear that honoring our organizational commitments and disciplines meant placing everyone back in their original positions, in their original boats, and continuing the trip. I gathered the entire group together and explained that I would trust Jake with my own family. I explained that what happened to him had also happened to me, and would most likely happen to every guide at some point during their career. Finally, I explained that I had the utmost confidence in Jake’s ability and skill, and found no fault or blame in him relative to the incident at hand. The cadets and their officers responded - each walked confidently to their boats without a word. They picked up their paddles as their clothes began to dry in the heat of the day, and looked to Jake and the others for their paddle commands.

In hindsight, it is clear that this moment of leadership was simply the bi-product of our organization’s collective dedication to the disciplines of shared vision, personal mastery and working with mental models to create an alternative reality. Had I not yielded to these values, the decision I made would have been based purely on self-interest, self-preservation or ease of execution. Thankfully, the organization was collectively learning the value of cultivating what Gardner (2008) calls a “respectful mind” (p.3), wherein individuals seek a shared vision despite significant differences. Certainly, Jake was different from myself in myriad ways. My respect for him, however, was borne out of a realization that “organizations and communities work more effectively when the individuals within them seek to understand one another (despite their

differences), to help one another, and to work together for a common goals” (Gardner, 2008, p.116).

In the moments immediately after the end of the rafting trip described herein, one of the officers quietly pulled me aside to voice his agreement with the decision that was made on the river that day. Moreover, the officer said in no uncertain terms, “Your commitment to re-affirm a peer after apparent failure was leadership at its finest.” I was flattered, but simply replied, “That wasn’t leadership, that was relationship.” With those words, I finally came to an understanding that relationships are the most fundamental building blocks of a healthy learning organization. Since then, I have learned to lean heavily on these words from Parker Palmer, who sought to elevate the importance of relationships in a learning community:

The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it. We grow by private trial and error, to be sure – but our willingness to try, and fail, as individuals is severely limited when we are not supported by a community that encourages such risks. (Palmer, 1998, p.144)

Without relationships that are centered on not only our tolerance, but also our very encouragement, of failure, a learning organization will be frozen in time. Leadership within learning organizations must, therefore, “support a restorative path” (Block, 2009, p.85), rather than definitively punish failure. Such a restorative path is undoubtedly one of the hallmarks of a thriving learning organization.

References

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