



The NewsUpFront

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LESSONS IN MANAGEMENT FROM LEWIS AND CLARK

When the Corps of Discovery left St. Louis 200 years ago, they took with them one thing that boosted their chance of success. That “thing” was the excellent management skill that Lewis and Clark possessed.

Here are three examples of good management by the Captains.

Share the command

When the Corps of Discovery set out for the Pacific Ocean, they were led by two Captains, right? Wrong! They were led by one Captain and one Lieutenant. Captain Meriweather Lewis, tapped by President Thomas Jefferson to lead the expedition, wanted a co-leader. He chose William Clark, a previous Army officer who was at that time a private citizen.

Though both Lewis and Jefferson proposed Clark be re-commissioned as a Captain, the Secretary of War refused and enlisted Clark as a Lieutenant. Yet Lewis had already

offered, and Clark had accepted, co-command of the expedition.

How did they handle this dilemma? Lewis wrote an immediate letter to Clark explaining the situation and proposing a solution: “I think it will be best to let none of our party or any other persons know any thing about the grade, you will observe that the grade has no effect on your compensation, which by God, shall be equal to my own.”

Historian Stephen Ambrose writes: “For the next seven years, only (seven people) knew that, as far as the army was concerned, Captain Lewis was in command of the Corps of Discovery, with Lieutenant William Clark as his second-in-command. For the men of the expedition, it was Captains Lewis and Clark, co-commanders. That was all that counted.”

And for the entire two and one-half years of the expedition, there is no evidence that



they ever deviated from shared management. Ambrose believes that this sharing was a critical part of their success. They each brought different strengths to the table and the shared management allowed them to use those strengths more often.

Build the team

The Corps of Discovery consisted of men from a number of Army posts, as well as civilians. The men were chosen for specific skills such as hunting, navigation, or knowledge of Indian languages. Two were blacksmiths; one was a musician. All were experienced in the woods and wilderness.

Many of the men didn't know each other. The soldiers were recruited from different Army posts; the civilians came primarily from St. Louis but were usually unacquainted.

To pull this diverse group together, Lewis and Clark grouped them into three squads. The squads were diverse by design; each was a mix of regular Army and civilians. Further, each squad worked together, ate together, stood watch together.

Lewis and Clark were keenly aware of the emotional needs of their men. They regularly administered "an extra gill of whiskey" when they thought the men had worked especially hard, or on special occasions such as the 4th of July. There were also celebrations when things went particularly well, such as when the hunters brought in extra game or when they made good progress during the day. These celebrations usually included dancing to Pierre Cruzatte's fiddle.

At the outset, there were fights, disagreements, breaking Army regulations; the Captains regularly needed to discipline some men. As the Corps ascended the Missouri River, the men began to pull together. By the time they reached the Mandan villages, where they spent the first winter, they were a cohesive, highly motivated unit. For the rest of the trip there are no indications of breaking regulations, or even so much as disagreements among the men. They had become a team, thanks in large part to the Captains' skill.

Ask for input, but make the tough decisions yourself

In June of 1805, Lewis and Clark faced a difficult choice. They had arrived at a fork in the Missouri River. The two rivers facing them were



The Missouri River near Mandan ND

identical in size and flow. The sketchy information they had received from the Hidatsa tribe the previous winter mentioned no large tributary in this area. So, which fork was the true Missouri?

To take the wrong fork would be a serious problem. The mountains were still ahead and progress upriver had been slower than expected that spring. Lewis and Clark desperately needed the right decision.

They began, as good decision-makers do, by pooling what data they had (the flow of the rivers, the clarity of the water, routes described by the Hidatsas, etc.) and gathering additional data quickly (by sending small parties up each fork a few days march to scout the course of the rivers).

Unfortunately, none of this was conclusive. Yet in both the Captains' minds the south fork was

the correct choice. What about their men? Lewis wrote in his journal, “The whole of my party to a man...were fully persuaded that this river (the north fork) was the Missouri.”

The Captains didn’t take a vote (as they did later in the expedition), but listened carefully to all the opinions of their men. Then, convinced that they were right and the men wrong, they led the expedition up the south fork. In what Stephen Ambrose calls “a magnificent tribute to the Captain’s leadership qualities,” the men, according to Lewis “said very cheerfully that they were ready to follow us anywhere we thought proper to direct, but that they still thought the other was the river.”

Lewis and Clark were, of course, right. The South Fork was the true Missouri; the north fork (named Marias River by Lewis) would have led them far off course to the north.

More about Lewis and Clark

The book “Undaunted Courage” by Stephen Ambrose is a fine way to learn about the expedition. Ambrose is also prominently featured in the Ken Burns documentary on Lewis and Clark, broadcast on PBS and widely available in video rental outlets.

About UpFront

UpFront is an organization development consulting firm located in Saint Joseph, Minnesota. We provide organization development, program evaluation and research services. Our company is a partnership between owners Dianne Tuff and Murdoch Johnson—and UpFront’s clients.

Our Mission

To help and support teams, organizations and communities as they merge past experience, present strengths and future dreams to create positive change.

Our Vision

UpFront works with progressive, socially-responsible organizations on projects that challenge us and build on our strengths. We strive for balance between the professional and personal—and we integrate our personal values into our professional lives.

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