



SOPHIA ASSOCIATES

Awakening Leadership Within

Navigating Hard Times

I live near Annapolis Maryland. Sailing and boating are a primary means of recreation here. I was recently sailing with a couple of friends and reflecting on how sailing is a metaphor for what I notice in leadership coaching conversations. I am not a sailor so I defer to those who have a greater competency in this arena but as an observer, I will share my observations that correlate to leadership.

1. You can steer the boat in the direction you want to go but the wind and water can often abruptly change and impact your progress. No one controls the elements and for as many weather and water forecasts you use to prepare for your sail the truth is that you may still go off course. Captains know this and accept it as a given. Because of their experience they build in contingencies. Of course personal flotation devices are always on board should the worse happen, they will survive.

Take away: Leaders can prepare for the future but must remain light and agile to move with the sudden shifts in the economy and in our world. We are noticing how the economies and the welfare of other countries have dramatic impact on our own and vice versa. If you see your stance as fluid and centered, if you remain open to new ideas and possibilities, you will be able to move quickly with the shifts. This is a strategic advantage that smaller companies can leverage now. Larger companies may be weighed down with their bureaucracy and hierarchies. Smaller companies can use the advantage they have in their size and organizational make up to be innovative and flexible, able to steer around the obstacles.

2. The best sailors do not delude themselves that they are in control. They maneuver based on their best estimates and on the data they have on hand but they tack (when a sailing vessel turns its bow through the wind so that the wind changes from one side to the other) when needed. Mother Nature always has the upper hand.

Take away: There will always be "Black Swans" – highly improbable and unpredictable events that occur. In his book Black Swans, Nassim Nicholas Taleb describes the lesson of the Black Swan story that "illustrates a severe limitation to our learning from observations or experience and the fragility of our knowledge." Regardless of what we know, a single improbable event can change everything. Strategic plans are based on what we know about the past and what we believe is possible for the future based on what we know. Rarely do strategy sessions take into account the "unacceptable" or "impossible", both on the negative and positive side. Taleb asks how can you project the future based on your knowledge of the past? How do you plan for the unpredictable?

3. Professional sailors, particularly the ones that race, choose their crew deliberately and with great care. The crew must function as a high performing unit, optimizing their collective experience and the technologies on board.

Take away: It takes the entire crew working at 100% to win a race; that and a little luck (when opportunity meets preparation). Anyone who is not working at 100% creates drag

on the team's progress. Keeping all members of the team sharp, learning and committed to the destination is part of the leadership role.

4. I asked one captain about the tools he uses to navigate. His boat was designed with state of the art systems, computerized navigational tools. After he described how each of these worked he showed me his most valuable tool. It was a compass. "No matter how great technology is, technology can still fail. The compass is the only tool that will always tell me where I am so I can figure out where I am going," he said.

Take away: CEO's often surround themselves with the latest technology to assess and plan, drive revenues and build the business. You may often forget that some of the most successful tools are also the simplest and most basic. This is especially true when it comes to customer service, sales and branding. Creating strong relationships with employees, clients, vendors and others includes the human touch. Being seen as a steward of the industry, your community or the environment, ethical governance and a commitment to developing employees are all based on the human aspects of leadership. In the absence of technology, you have people impacting your business.

5. The horizon is not the end of one's sailing journey. It is only the limit of one's view, not the same thing as the end. Long ago sailors were afraid that they would fall off the world if they reached the horizon, that there must be a drop off just beyond where they could see. Because they believed that the earth was flat their reality was limited by what they could see. You can't see what you don't know exists. Or can you?

Take away: Here is a challenge. Get your team together to spend an afternoon, morning or day "imagining" your future. Who would've imagined Facebook or Twitter even ten years ago, or our largest banks, insurance corporations or automakers failing? Don't limit your ideas to what you know or what you think is doable, acceptable or reasonable. Tap into your imaginations – what will the world look like in fifty years or a hundred years? How does your company fit into this? How will your company contribute to this future imagined world? What is the best and worst it could be? In a course on sustainability our team was asked to imagine the future, how people would live and what we could do now to contribute to this future. Our ideas were diverse and innovative. We imagined communities as self-sustaining yet inter-related pods. No single houses but more like honey comb shaped communal living where each pod would grow their own food and share it with other communities. We imagined how we would sustain clean air and water, how the children would be educated, what currency would be used and more. The exercise of "imagining" inspired break-through ideas for our businesses now that many of us are implementing. When there is no right or wrong answer, the possibilities are truly endless.

CEO's are steering through some rough waters right now and I don't believe anyone can accurately predict when and how things will change. What can you do right now to navigate to a future of prosperity for your business and community? Imagine the best and worst scenario. Even the worst scenario has the potential for breakthrough thinking so don't fear it or avoid considering the "unacceptable". You are the captain of your vessel. Go forth, explore and have a great adventure!

© 2011 Alicia M. Rodriguez, M.A., P.C.C., - Certified Executive and Leadership Coach and "Wisdom Partner", founder of **Sophia Associates, Inc.**, an international executive and leadership coaching practice dedicated to enhancing leadership competencies, strengthening executive performance levels, creating opportunities for personal learning and developing high performing teams.

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