



Leadership Lessons from the Lewis and Clark Expedition



RAYNER & ASSOCIATES, INC.

P.O. BOX 1164 • FREELAND, WA 98249
PHONE: (425) 508-3014 • VOICE MAIL: (360) 331-6773
rayner@raynerassoc.com • www.raynerassoc.com

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Leadership Lessons from the Lewis & Clark Expedition

by Steven R. Rayner
Rayner & Associates, Inc.

At this moment, every individual of the party are in good health and excellent sperits; zealously attached to the enterprise, and anxious to proceed; not a whisper of discontent or murmur is to be heard among them; but all in unison act with the most perfect harmony. With such men I have every thing to hope, and but little to fear.

—Meriwether Lewis

In May 1804, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, along with the volunteers that made up the Corps of Discovery, began an expedition that would reshape the United States. Their mission: to locate the Northwest Passage and explore the western territory.

They would be gone nearly three years. They would be threatened by starvation and the dangers of the unknown wilderness. They would experience setbacks and disappointment in their mission. But in the course of the 8,000-mile journey, the Corps of Discovery lost only one man—to appendicitis, a condition that was nearly always fatal in the early 19th century. They ultimately defined and mapped a route for crossing the continent, discovered and catalogued thousands of animals and plants that were previously unknown to science, and dispelled many myths of the west (including the belief woolly mammoths roamed the mountains). The great success of their expedition can be measured in its profound impact on the history and development of the young United States.

During their journey across the continent, both Lewis and Clark played a variety of roles, including that of anthropologist, botanist, biologist, diplomat, navigator, and geographer. Perhaps most important of all, they were extraordinary leaders. A number of factors contributed to their success, not least of which was their profound respect for each other; acting as a team, they helped create a larger team with the flexibility to deal with uncertainty, overcome adversity, and seize opportunity. The lessons this extraordinary expedition offers modern leaders are many.

Establish a Clear Charter

President Thomas Jefferson commissioned the Corps of Discovery and clearly defined its purpose of locating the Northwest Passage. Until Lewis and Clark's expedition, belief in the Northwest Passage was strong. The mythic water route would connect the Missouri River to the Columbia River and therefore to the Pacific Ocean, opening up the entire western half of the continent to commerce.

Jefferson's instructions called for more than discovering the hoped-for route, however. He was interested in plant and animal life, minerals, the potential for agriculture. The Corps of Discovery was to create maps of the area, document the languages and customs of the native inhabitants, and collect plant and animal specimens. Jefferson defined how expedition members were to conduct themselves when encountering natives ("treat them in the most friendly & conciliatory manner which their own conduct will admit") and what to do if they encountered hostilities ("you must decline its further pursuit").

Lewis and Clark could have no question about the purpose or spirit of their enterprise. Its commercial considerations, scientific responsibilities, political strategies, and long term importance to the people of the United States were clearly defined by Jefferson long before their journey began.

LEADERSHIP LESSON: *Without a clearly defined purpose, a team often wastes time and energy on the priorities and agendas of its members rather than on its greater mission. Leaders must be crystal clear about the purpose of the team or organization they lead and able to communicate that purpose to its members.*

Fully Empower Others to Take Action

Jefferson recognized that such a clear purpose was futile without the corresponding authority, resources, and knowledge to execute it. He ensured that Meriwether Lewis, who at the expedition's conception was to be its sole leader, was fully empowered to carry out his mission.

AUTHORITY:

Lewis was given full and complete authority for all decisions made in the field. He would later choose to share his formal authority with William Clark. Both Lewis and Clark sought input from other members of the expedition, particularly on issues that were controversial and critical to the mission's success.

RESOURCES:

President Jefferson gave Lewis a letter of credit to purchase the equipment, clothing, food, gifts, and medicine the expedition would need. He was given broad discretion and a significant budget in outfitting the expedition.

INFORMATION:

Lewis had complete access to President Jefferson's personal library, which contained the most extensive and current information on the western territory. He was also given complete access to relevant government information, including details about the Louisiana Purchase and Spanish military movements.

ACCOUNTABILITY:

Lewis' responsibilities were clear: he was to find the headwaters of the Missouri and travel to the Pacific Ocean. He was to study and document plants, minerals, and animals. He was to serve as an ambassador of the United States and maintain friendly relations with the native people he encountered.

SKILLS:

Lewis was encouraged to consult with the leading American experts in biology, botany, navigation, and medicine.

EMPOWERING OTHERS

Authority x Resources x Information x Accountability x Skills =
EMPOWERMENT

Effective leaders empower others by making sure they have an adequate amount of these five elements to take direct action.

LEADERSHIP LESSON: *Empowerment is a combination of authority, resources, information, accountability, and skills. Effective leaders empower others by making sure they have an adequate amount of these five elements to take direct action.*

Engage in Planning and Preparation

Meriwether Lewis knew that the ultimate success of his mission and the lives of the men he would be leading depended on the thoroughness of his planning. He contemplated the journey for more than ten years before the Corps of Discovery left St. Louis. He considered and reconsidered innumerable details, including the design of boats, lists of provisions, the necessary quantity of gunpowder (critical for hunting and defense) and whiskey (critical for morale). Lewis interviewed trappers, examined every known map, and read every account that described the western wilderness. He studied subjects critical to the success of the expedition—subjects that included medicine, botany, and celestial navigation.

On the day he and Clark and the rest of the team headed west, Lewis knew they were well prepared.

LEADERSHIP LESSON: *Preparation is critical to success, whether that preparation takes the form of a strategic plan for the next five years or an agenda for next week's staff meeting. As a simple example, 80% of a meeting's effectiveness is determined prior to its start time—a well-defined and thorough meeting plan dramatically improves team effectiveness. Planning keeps you on course to achieving your objectives and ensures that the strategies your team pursues fit into the big picture of the organization.*

Engender Trust and Mutual Respect

Though Jefferson had entrusted the leadership of the expedition to Meriwether Lewis, Lewis proposed that he share his responsibilities with William Clark. They would be equal in rank, authority, and rewards. In his invitational letter to Clark, Lewis writes:

He [President Jefferson] has authorised me to say that in the event of your accepting this proposition he will grant you a Captain's commission . . . your situation if joined with me in this mission will be in all respects be precisely such as my own.

Jefferson later rescinded his offer to use his influence with the war department to gain Clark the promised captain's commission. This put Lewis in an embarrassing bind. Convinced that shared leadership with Clark was essential to the success of the expedition, Lewis asked Clark to keep his official rank of lieutenant secret. During the entire journey, he and Clark operated

as co-captains, and no member of the expedition suspected the difference of rank. They complemented each other in skill and temperament, and as a unit, their knowledge and capability surpassed what either could independently achieve. The two men had a tremendous amount of respect for each other, and they were able to maintain a consistent underlying philosophy and mission. The mutual respect Lewis and Clark had for one another was so great there is not a single recorded instance in any of the expedition journals where the two had a disagreement or argument in front of the members of the Corps. Their role of modeling of trust and respect carried over to the men they led.

LEADERSHIP LESSON: *By modeling your trust and respect for others, you are creating the foundation for a healthy work environment. In a leadership role others will follow your example, so set a positive example that will serve to strengthen your team.*

Focus on Knowledge, Not Hierarchy

Lewis and Clark consistently demonstrated that each valued one's knowledge over his/her position in the hierarchy. When the Shoshone guide Sacagawea joined the expedition, they honored her superior knowledge of the terrain and tribal customs; her knowledge was sought, her opinions respected, and her influence significant. Additionally, Lewis and Clark valued the opinions of their men and sought consensus, especially when making decisions critical to the expedition.

While Lewis and Clark were virtually unified in their decisions, they occasionally disagreed with the other members of the Corps. One such disagreement arose in the search for the headwaters of the Missouri. A fork in the river emerged. One branch—heading north—was preferred by the men. Lewis and Clark believed the other fork—which headed south—was the better choice, because the water was clearer, indicating it had come from mountain runoff. The decision was critical. Selecting the wrong fork would almost certainly delay the expedition another season and, in the minds of Lewis and Clark, “probably so dishearten the party that it might defeat the expedition altogether.”

Rather than make an autocratic decision—which they had the clear authority to do—Lewis and Clark put together a small party to explore the northern fork. Led by Lewis, the explorers followed the river 40 miles north-

ward. Lewis returned convinced that he and Clark had been right—that the southern route would lead them to the great waterfalls (modern day Great Falls, Montana) described by members of the Hidatsas tribe. This waterfall was the key landmark that would indicate they were on the correct route.

The men of the expedition appreciated the respect the Captains had shown for their opinion and were “very cheerful ... ready to follow [Lewis and Clark] any where [they] thought proper to direct.” To further gain their commitment and to keep options open in case he and Clark were somehow wrong, Lewis and a small party left by land to explore the southern fork of the river. The main body of the Corps of Discovery followed by boat under the guidance of Clark. After several days of travel, Lewis heard a mighty roar—the great waterfall lay ahead.

LEADERSHIP LESSON: *For Lewis and Clark, being “in charge” was always secondary to using the available knowledge and resources necessary to achieve their objectives. The members of any team possess knowledge, perspectives, and experience. As a leader be open to listening to the members of your team and utilize their knowledge regardless of where they stand in the organization hierarchy.*

Select a Cohesive Team; Establish and Reinforce Positive Norms

The majority of discipline problems recorded in the expedition journals occurred in the first months of the journey (including an incident when a guard fell asleep at his post). Early on, Lewis and Clark established the norms of acceptable behavior through a combination of reward and, when necessary, punishment. They knew that one man’s failure to perform a critical duty could result in disaster for the entire expedition.

Lewis and Clark minimized performance problems before the expedition began by employing a rigorous selection process. They chose skilled outdoorsmen who they believed could effectively work together as a unit, and they rejected unsuitable volunteers. They set a high bar for acceptance into the expedition and considered how compatible recruits would be with other members of the Corps in equal importance to their outdoors skills, knowledge, and courage.

LEADERSHIP LESSON: *Team members must possess both technical skills and team skills. The technically brilliant engineer who can't get along with anyone will be more of a liability than an asset; the "great team player" that lacks the technical skills to perform his/her role is an equal liability. Team member selection is critical in creating a cohesive team. Furthermore, operating guidelines must be established and reinforced early on to ensure the development of positive team norms.*

Be an Agent of Change

Upon finally reaching what seemed to be the Missouri's source, high in the Rocky Mountains near modern day Lemhi Pass, the members of the Corps of Discovery suddenly realized that the Columbia was not a short traverse away. All they could see for miles and miles were mountains and more mountains. They saw no great river.

The Northwest Passage was a myth.

Lewis and Clark would learn in the months ahead that the Columbia River, their route to the Pacific Ocean, was over three hundred miles away. Instead of a short portage—after which they would drop their boats into swift currents that would sweep them downstream toward the Pacific—they now faced an immense trek across a treacherous, snow-capped mountain range. Everything the explorers had believed in and expected—everything they had prepared for—vanished as they looked across the range of seemingly endless mountains.

The horses they had hoped to obtain from the Shoshone Indians for the ease of their portage were now critical to their hopes of making it out of the mountains alive. Their dwindling food supply, coupled with a lack of game in the area, heightened their realization that the Rockies might be impassable. Days before, they had believed the most difficult part of their journey to be over; now, what lay ahead was far more dangerous than anything yet encountered.

In the shadow of this challenge, the Corps began to systematically re-orient itself. They purchased horses, collected food, and engaged a scout to help them find the shortest route through the mountains. Nevertheless, as they climbed peaks and descended into valleys—only to climb yet another peak and descend into yet another valley—hunger began to take its toll.

The Corps adapted further, melting snow and mixing it with a powdered concoction to make a soup. When that was gone, they killed and ate their horses. Each day brought new challenges that required immediate adaptation.

The test of a great team is its ability to adapt to changing conditions. With everything turned upside down for the Corps of Discovery, they reacted quickly and as a cohesive unit. Adapting to a dramatically changed set of circumstances, they successfully traversed the Rockies and went on to achieve their goal of the Pacific Ocean.

LEADERSHIP LESSON: *Social theorists refer to today's business environment as a "turbulent field," with dramatic changes occurring at such a rapid pace that flexibility and adaptation to change are qualities paramount to success. The modern leader must be an agent of change, an individual who can make opportunity out of adversity. Work hard to develop a team that has a high tolerance for ambiguity and can adapt quickly to ever-changing requirements.*

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM LEWIS & CLARK

- Establish a clear charter
- Fully empower others to take action
- Engage in planning and preparation
- Engender trust and mutual respect
- Focus on knowledge, not hierarchy
- Select a cohesive team; establish and reinforce positive norms
- Be an agent of change

A Final Thought

The Lewis and Clark expedition had a profound impact on the development of United States as a nation. But the expedition can also be seen in another light—its leadership lessons for modern day managers. In this article we have examined the traits Lewis and Clark demonstrated throughout their expedition and translated them into lessons for modern leaders. The legacy of Lewis and Clark goes beyond the discoveries they made, the maps they created, or the routes they set—the very way they conducted themselves and interacted with the Corps of Discovery provides valuable insights into the practice of leadership. And these leadership insights are as relevant and important today as they were in 1804.