



Wysowl Pty Ltd

ACN 010 677 022

10 Jacksonia Drive
WARNER QLD 4500
Ph: Intl+ 61 7 3882 1822
Fax: Intl+ 61 7 3882 1800
wysowl@msn.com.au

Wysowl Pty Ltd
Newsletter Number 8
November 2001

A STUDY IN LEADERSHIP

By John McConnell

Published in Journal for Quality and Participation Vol 24, no. 3
Cincinnati, Ohio, Fall 2001

Make a list of the people who profoundly changed your life. It will likely be a short list. Mine contained five names. One was my grandmother, the only person I knew who was capable of unconditional love. Two were teachers I was fortunate enough to study under in high school. Dr. Deming was another, and the final name belonged to the first boss I had after being commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Royal Australian Engineers, Major Peter Perry.

Peter was a diamond in the rough. He worked hard, and played even harder. One always knew where one stood with Peter, he made very sure of that, and he made a habit of calling a spade a bloody shovel. He could be a most amicable fellow, and he could be explosively angry. If you look at the long lists of qualities leaders are supposed to have, Peter would score poorly on many of them, but he was the finest leader of men I was fortunate enough to serve under.

Peter took over a field squadron that was desperately short of officers and non-commissioned officers, a common enough problem in the era immediately following the Vietnam War. Morale was low and the squadron certainly was not up to scratch operationally. Yawning gaps in skills and experience were almost everywhere.

Eighteen months later Peter commanded what was likely the finest field squadron in the corps. Morale and esprit de corps were high. Skill levels had soared and the squadron had performed so well in the field that corps doctrine was, in some cases, rewritten to accommodate and teach the squadron's breakthroughs in performance. Some people swore by his irreverent, rough and ready but extremely focussed approach, others swore at it. His effectiveness as a leader, however, was undoubted.

Twenty years after my two years of working for Peter, Dr. W. Edwards Deming encouraged me to think through why Peter had such an impact on me and what it was that made him such an effective leader. What follows is the most profound of my recollections.

Pursuit of the AIM

Peter was never one to be much troubled by tiresome rules and regulations. He was a soldier, and seldom flaunted the rules openly. However, he never lost sight of the aim and he rarely allowed rules and due process stand in the way. If a few rules had to be bent a little, then so be it. (However, short cuts were never taken with safety and similar issues.) Peter stood on more than a few toes along the way, and he could never be accused of being politically correct. He firmly believed that the only thing leaders had to do well was to lead, and he demanded as much. The support elements were left in no doubt that they existed only to help the field engineers to do their job. The tail was not allowed to wag the dog.

Nowadays I work as a consultant, and am disappointed by the predominance of managers who will stick to every minor rule in an attempt to avoid change and/or conflict or because in their minds the rules of the game have become the major aim. Edward de Bono created a word for this type of behaviour, *ludocy*, from the Latin *ludo*, to play. No matter how bad matters become, these managers can generally point to how well they complied with the rules and regulations. They are playing the game as if compliance to the rules is the aim.

In addition, I am shocked to see how much power the support functions such as QA, HR and Tech. Services wield in some organizations. In some companies, managers are afraid to make personnel decisions

without first seeking approval from HR. Other examples abound.

Let us be very clear on this point. I believe that a huge part of Peter's success was that he never lost sight of the Aim, and that he demanded the same of his subordinate leaders and of his support areas. Also, he understood well that no matter how hard we work at teamwork, that effective teams only emerge when all are in pursuit of a common goal, and this includes the support functions.

The Truth as a Virtue

In Peter's squadron new officers were informed that he didn't mind so much if they screwed up. Second Lieutenants were expected to make mistakes. He would be concerned about those who did not. Mistakes, errors of judgement and even foolhardiness could be forgiven, provided he was the second person to find out; second that is, after the offender. If he was the third or subsequent person to learn of the mistake, or if an attempt at concealment was made, he left no doubt that matters would become very ugly. He then proceeded to live up to his policy. One subaltern's career suffered severely when he made the mistake of concealing the truth from Peter.

I can clearly remember making a decision that resulted in the flooding of an entire workshop. Even more vivid is my recollection of a vain attempt to break the land speed record in a Land Rover. I was driving to Peter's office. I desperately needed to admit my sins before the workshop commander figured out who had flooded his facility and telephoned Peter. That afternoon Peter and the workshop commander had a lot of fun at my expense over a few beers in the officer's mess; but that was the end of the matter, apart from the clean up. Peter Perry created an environment where ludecy, lies and concealment of the truth were chief amongst sins. It will surprise no one to hear that he enjoyed a high level of loyalty, respect and admiration from the men in his squadron. Also, because he was nearly always possessed of the facts concerning the crisis, he was better able to take remedial action. It took me another year to figure out that one of the reasons Peter wanted to know about our blunders quickly was so he could protect us from ourselves. I found out the hard way when probably he saved my career by defusing an attempt to haul me before a court martial.

Now it is common to see very senior managers "massaging" their numbers. In corporations, reports regularly conceal as much as they reveal and we have, in some cases, become so politically correct that we are in desperate need of the childlike clarity necessary to exclaim that the Emperor has no clothes. Look at your business. Can you truly claim that in your organization the truth is a routinely practiced virtue; or are you more likely to declare that the corporate culture creates

avoidance and concealment of those truths that are unpalatable?

Footnote: As Rob Guttentag pointed out after reading the first draft of this newsletter, this clarity of purpose is not magic. Deming called it "Constancy of Purpose" and in "Seven Habits", Stephen Covey calls this behaviour "begin with the end in mind". The famous Jewish author, Victor Frankl, analysed why some had survived the concentration camps and some had not. He concluded that those who had unfinished business to complete after the war were more likely to find a way to survive and get the opportunity to complete what ever it was that was driving them. They had a purpose.

Also, Rob pointed out that in Stephen Covey's empowerment model, this sort of behaviour engenders trust because it is eminently trustworthy, and when allied with a clear vision, appropriate skills, supportive systems and the right team, anything is possible.