

Lead Us Not (Into Too Many Comedy Zones at Work)

Written by Jack Sparacino

Tuesday, 16 December 2014 14:41

Haven't most of us been touched by a great leader or two in our lives, whether in person or through the media? Principals, teachers, military officers, the occasional politician may come to mind. Perhaps icons like Martin Luther King, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln; maybe a great coach like Pat Riley, Steve Spurrier, Pat Summitt or Joe Torre. For reference, The Leadership Institute at Harvard College defines leadership as "*the skill of motivating, guiding, and empowering a team towards a socially responsible vision.*"

I would add terrific parents to any list of great leaders.

Scholar Eric Michel adds his own interesting spin, noting that "I see leadership as the art of empowering and mobilizing others to want to accomplish a mutually agreed-upon goal while advancing the group's integrity and morale." This view dovetails nicely with that of Dwight D. Eisenhower, who led an almost overwhelmingly complex set of Allied forces' plans at D-Day and went on to become our 34th president, leading our nation during a time of nearly unmatched growth, prosperity and world dominance. In his words, "Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it

."

It's hard to exaggerate the significance that's attributed to management courses in leadership. And no wonder MBA's are such exciting folks, the sort you just can't wait to show up at your next barbeque or cocktail party. We all want good if not great leaders to help show us the way forward, right? And to provide inspiration that's followed, one hopes, with suitable rewards and recognition for jobs well done by teammates and subordinates.

Then we have the other side of the leadership coin... questionable if not terrible examples. The following survey-topping quotes from American business came from a magazine that recently ran a "Dilbert" contest. These real life quotes make special sense to those of us who think we sometimes live in a world rimmed with funhouse mirrors and flooded by spooky background music (like by the Doors' organist Ray Manzarek). To all the rest of us? Hmmm...

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"As of tomorrow, employees will only be able to access the building using individual security cards. Pictures will be taken next Wednesday, and employees will receive their cards in two weeks." *(from Fred Dales, Microsoft Corp. in Redmond WA)*

OK, let's all check our calendars for this one, a 'timeless' quote if one was ever uttered. While we're waiting for our photo to be taken, perhaps management would settle for our providing a sketch of ourselves or, you know, one of those "selfies." And who thought Wednesdays were just reserved for Prince spaghetti?

"What I need is an exact list of specific unknown problems we might encounter." *(Lykes Lines Shipping)*

I really *lykes* this one. There's no need to read between the, like, lines and I can't help but wonder if Donald Rumsfeld served as an inspiration. Perhaps this quote can be placed next to the tomb of the specific unknown soldier if that's not a problem.

"E-mail is not to be used to pass on information or data. It should be used only for company business." *(Accounting manager, Electric Boat Company)*

Well, *excuse me* if I ever sent an e-mail to someone with any information or data in it. Does that count stuff that I forwarded? Do I need to go back and check thousands of pieces of mail to see if there was any information in any of them? Yikes, that could take all morning! But hey, what if some of the mail was informative *and* it was used for company business? And what if there was a company note that asked for information? Somebody please get me something for this headache that's coming on!

"This project is so important we can't let things that are more important interfere with it." *(Advertising/Marketing manager, United Parcel Service)*

Ok, can we let things that are *less* or *equally* important get in the way? Who's in charge of making these determinations? Are they allowed to mail in their decisions? How about driving in their explanations? Does their car or van have to be brown?

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"Doing it right is no excuse for not meeting the schedule." (*Plant Manager, Delco Corporation*)□

OK chief, so it's better to be on time with a wrong answer than late with the right one? Who gets to explain that to customers? And just how does one get to be a plant manager at Delco? If it's based on management evaluations of performance, do they need to be accurate?

"No one will believe you solved this problem in one day! We've been working on it for months. Now go act busy for a few weeks and I'll let you know when it's time to tell them." (*R&D supervisor, 3M Corp.*)

Well how dare you solve a problem quickly, are you out of your mind? While we're acting busy (is that in our job descriptions?), can we work on other problems? Can we take a quick break to tape this advice to a wall? Anybody got a 3M post-it note I can borrow?

Quote from the Boss: "Teamwork is a lot of people doing what I say." (*Marketing executive, Citrix Corporation*)

Shall we just cut to the chase and blow by all that stuff about Citrix being a "market leader in all of the key technology categories that are uniquely integrated for the most complete mobile workspace delivery infrastructure and apps"? The boss says "jump," we just ask "how high?" Do we have an app for that or should we just wing it?

My sister passed away and her funeral was scheduled for Monday. When I told my boss, he said she died on purpose so that I would have to miss work on the busiest day of the year. He then asked if we could change her burial to Friday. He said, "That would be better for me." (*Shipping executive, FTD Florists*)

Well, this should take care of anyone who ever thought that sending flowers to someone going through a difficult time was at heart just a sensitive gesture. Maybe this boss has a very weird point . . . we should plan our demise around his terribly busy schedule. And maybe pre-arrange

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to send *him* flowers, how about that?

"We know that communication is a problem, but the company is not going to discuss it with the employees." (*Switching supervisor, AT&T Long Lines Division*)

Good move, fella. We're wondering what other insightful gems you've come up with that catapulted you from entry level switching wienie to supervisor. While we're at it, maybe we should switch you with that bright up and comer standing right behind you in that long line.

We recently received a memo from senior management saying: "This is to inform you that a memo will be issued today regarding the subject mentioned above." (*Microsoft, Legal Affairs Division*)
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This one leaves me speechless. Who said we've got too many lawyers, anyway?

So in the spirit of workplace cheer, here's to Dilbert and all his followers. May the farce be with you!