Leading into the Unknown: How Lewis and Clark Built a Great Team

This year marks the bicentennial of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark’s extraordinary Journey of Discovery. The expedition, due to its historical significance, is being celebrated with scores of events and festivities all across the nation. It is, however, a mistake to view the journey merely in historical terms. For in spite of a 200-year gap, the challenges Lewis and Clark faced and those confronting today’s leaders are very similar. The 21st century is a time of accelerating, almost exponential, change. Technological advances are being announced every day and the relentless advancement of knowledge is propelling society faster and faster into unknown territory; and like Lewis and Clark in their time, today’s leaders have only the vaguest concept of what lies around the next bend in the river or what new obstacles await them on the other side of the mountain.

Lewis and Clark’s journey is full of valuable lessons, but perhaps none more so than the captains’ ability to turn a tough group of individuals into a fully functional, highly effective team. By the time the Corps of Discovery returned to St. Louis in September 1806, the team had not only accomplished a goal that, in its era, was the equivalent of landing on the moon; it had quite literally forged the trail that set America on its westward path and defined this country’s destiny.

How did they do it? Although there is no one single answer, one word succinctly captures the essence of their success: leadership. The one constant over their 863-day odyssey was the captains’ steady leadership in pursuit of their mission. At every phase and juncture of the journey the captains kept their team focused on its mission and led them across 8,000 miles of forbidding terrain and surmounted, by one count, 56 separate life-threatening situations.

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Laying the Foundation

Long before Lewis and Clark even departed on their journey the two men were laying the foundation for team building. The first concrete step was Meriwether Lewis’s decision to confer upon William Clark co-commander status, ignoring Clark’s lower army rank. The decision was—and still is—almost unprecedented in the annals of military history, and it signaled to those serving under their command that the significance and nature of the expedition was so important that many of the old ways of doing things would be thrown out the window.

The captains also showed unfailing respect for each other, and they treated their men and the native Indians with similar courtesy and respect. On a daily basis, the captains also shared in the journey’s hardships. They did not hesitate to carry supplies, cook for their men, or get out and push or pull the keelboat if that was what was required. Their willingness to partake in all the dangers and fatigue demonstrated that they fully understood the burdens and difficulties they were assigning their team and was yet another sign of respect for their team. That they did all of this while also carrying out their immense responsibilities of recording and documenting in exquisite detail everything that they found is a testament to their willingness to go the extra mile.

Well before Lewis and Clark departed they were already working to build a cohesive team. Their first tangible team-building decision was to select team members based solely on merit. Only men who would pull their own weight—and then some—were chosen. Regardless of social or ethnic background each person—including many men of mixed French and Indian blood—was selected for unique talents. Instantly, this action provided the members with the feeling that they were part of an elite group and reinforced the idea that the old ways of doing things would not be adhered to if they didn’t contribute to the success of the mission.

As they officially embarked on their journey from Camp Dubois in May 1804, the captains made their next team-related decision when they placed all the members of what would eventually become the “permanent party” in the main keelboat. (A smaller party accompanied the expedition on the first leg of the journey but returned in the spring of 1805.) The decision proved wise because it immediately gave the permanent party an opportunity to work closely together as a team. Their struggle to push, pull, row, and sail the boat up against the mighty and unrelenting current of the Missouri River can be thought of as an early bonding experience.

The next strategic team-building decision occurred in August 1804, after the death of Sergeant Charles Floyd (the expedition’s only casualty). For reasons never elaborated on in their journals, Lewis and Clark polled their men on who they wanted to replace Floyd as sergeant. Their decision is one of the earliest and most vivid examples of the captain’s respect for—and trust in—their men. With this decision, they were essentially saying, “This is our journey.”
Leading by Example

A month later, after battling sandstorms and swarms of mosquitoes so thick the group members had to cover themselves in grease to escape the torment, the expedition encountered the Teton Sioux, the most powerful Indian tribe on the plains. A Sioux chieftain stopped the expedition and refused to allow progress upriver unless the captains paid an exorbitant toll. Unwilling to be intimidated, Clark drew his sword and Lewis took up position behind the keelboat’s powerful cannon. On shore, hundreds of young Teton warriors readied their arrows. A deadly fight was seconds away. Sensing the captains’ resolve, another chieftain stepped in and allowed the expedition to pass. By standing their ground and placing themselves at the greatest risk, Lewis and Clark demonstrated the time-tested power of leading from the front.

By late October, the Corps of Discovery reached their first winter camp at Fort Mandan, near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota. For five long months at Fort Mandan, Lewis and Clark practiced what Tom Peters would call “management by walking around.” By making themselves approachable, the captains were able to keep a finger on the pulse of their team and settle problems and prevent rumors from spreading before they could have a negative impact on morale. The remarkable absence of major mistakes, fights, and rumors over the course of the long expedition is a testament to the captains’ remarkable skills in this area, which are among the reasons why the team was able to coalesce as quickly as it did.

During this period Lewis and Clark’s compassion for their team is also evident. In February of 1805, shortly after they hired Toussaint Charbonneau (along with his wife, Sacagawea) as an interpreter, Meriwether Lewis demonstrated his concern as he tenderly cared for the teenage girl during the difficult birth of her child. The captains’ kindness extended to all of their men as they treated them on a regular basis for everything from dysentery, knife cuts, and separated shoulders to constipation and venereal disease. By their actions, they were able to demonstrate that they cared for each person as an individual and did not simply view them as faceless cogs in a machine.

In early April 1805, after the river thawed, the expedition continued westward. It is at this instant that the 33 members of the permanent party officially became the Corps of Discovery. The title is particularly appropriate because it is at this precise point that the expedition truly began exploring unknown territory. Up to this time, no American of European descent had ever ventured further west than Fort Mandan.

The captains must have intuitively sensed that this portion of the expedition was going to be uniquely different and that they would need to rely less on their own considerable talents and more on the contributions of each member. Their actions reflect a substantial departure from their previous behavior. Most notable is the fact that they abandoned their old style of military discipline and adopted a gentler and more positive approach to managing their team. During the first leg of the journey, as the group was still feeling one another out, the captains dispensed military justice, including corporal punishment, on a consistent although infrequent basis. Once they entered unknown territory, however, the whip was never taken.
The use of positive incentives increased dramatically and Lewis and Clark repeatedly rewarded their men and Sacagawea by naming creeks and streams in their honor. And at the end of a tough or particularly arduous day, the captains would dispense small amounts of the few luxury items—whiskey and tobacco—they brought with them. The change seems to reflect a tangible, if unconsciousness, acknowledgment that their new environment required an approach that relied less on command-and-control tactics and instead favored a leadership style that promoted camaraderie and encouraged flexibility and initiative.

Persistence, Optimism, and Courage

In June 1805, after battling grizzlies, severe illness, the elements, and the frigid water of the Missouri, the Corps of Discovery reached a fork in the river. It represented a vexing dilemma to Lewis and Clark. None of the Indians they had consulted the preceding winter spoke of the fork and, as a result, they had no idea which one represented the Missouri River. To pick the wrong river would delay the expedition for months and potentially derail the whole journey. The captains were faced with their first real decision of significance. Every person, with the exception of the captains themselves, believed the north fork was the true Missouri River because it ran brown and muddy and looked exactly like the Missouri had since leaving Camp Dubious the previous year. (The other fork ran fast and clear.) The captains, after venturing along the rivers themselves, reached a different conclusion and ordered the party down the south fork. Although their decision was firm and final, how they handled the situation reveals a subtle but powerful lesson about how they were able to keep the team operating as a cohesive unit in the face of significant disagreement. They did it by listening and taking into consideration their team members’ concerns. This manifested itself in the captains’ decision to hedge against the possibility of an incorrect decision by sending Lewis ahead with a small advance party to ensure they were on the right path. In essence, they said to their team, “We have listened to you and you may be right.” It is a testament to Lewis and Clark’s leadership that in spite of everyone disagreeing with their assessment, the team still went “cheerfully” along with the decision.

The captains’ diligence and gut instinct ultimately proved correct, but they quickly faced their next great challenge. They had been told by Indians that they could expect to find one waterfall: the Great Falls. Instead, they were confronted with five. What Lewis and Clark had assumed would be a short half-day portage—carrying their boats and equipment up on the river banks—turned into a brutal 18-mile, 32-day struggle that pushed the Corps of Discovery to the brink of physical exhaustion. The work was so arduous that when the captains provided a break some of the men fell asleep instantly. The portage, which had to be completed four times in order to transport all their equipment, demonstrated the power of teamwork and confirmed the captains’ ability to keep the group moving forward under even the most trying of circumstances. They did it by staying positive, assisting in the physical labor, and being open to suggestions.

As they continued their advance up the river, Meriwether Lewis ordered the Corps of Discovery to spend

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the better part of two weeks constructing a boat from an iron frame, which they had hauled 2,000 miles up the river. Lewis felt the boat was essential for continuing upriver in the now shallower waters of the Missouri and he delayed the expedition during the height of the traveling season in order to build it. Upon being placed in the river it sank immediately (due a lack of pine tar which was essential for adhering the animal skin hides to the frame). Rather than push the matter, Lewis, who had a lot of pride riding on the project, simply swallowed his pride and demonstrated another hallmark of leadership by admitting his mistake and allowing the team to move on. The episode reflects the captains’ recognition that focusing on mistakes ran counter to the long-term success of their mission and that the spirit of exploration is one of moving forward, not one of dwelling on the past.

**Pushing the Limit**

By mid-July, after being delayed by the portage and the failed iron-boat experiment, the Corps of Discovery was still nowhere near the headwaters of the Missouri. To make matters worse, the Rocky Mountains still loomed to their immediate west. If they were going to succeed in their mission it was vital that they meet up with the Shoshone Indians, whom they had learned lived in the area, in order to trade for vital supplies. For the better part of July and into August the group looked without success for the Shoshone. The captains, however, never gave up hope and both Lewis and Clark, at separate times, went out in search of the Indians. Ultimately their persistence paid off and they located the tribe, who proved instrumental in keeping the expedition moving westward.

Just how essential the Shoshone were was made clear the day after they located the tribe. On August 12, 1805, Meriwether Lewis climbed the eastern slope of the Continental Divide toward the realization of a lifelong goal. He thought he was on the verge of becoming the first European American to view with his own eyes the fabled Northwest Passage—an all-water route that connected the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. It was a dream as old as Christopher Columbus and the discovery of the passage was President Thomas Jefferson’s primary motivation for authorizing the journey of the Corps of Discovery. But when Lewis reached the summit and gazed west what he saw was not a river running westward toward the Pacific but rather more mountains—mountains as far as the eye could see. It was at that precise moment that the dream for locating an all-water route vanished. Furthermore, from atop the Continental Divide, it was clear that the future was going to be totally different from anything he or Captain Clark had expected. Remarkably, the captains pressed on with undiminished optimism. They successfully negotiated with the Shoshone to help them portage materials and goods to the base of the Bitterroot mountains and kept their team’s spirits upbeat by refocusing their attention on the next goal, reaching the Pacific.

The captains’ inherent optimism would be pushed to the limit during the next phase of their journey. In early September 1805, the Corps of Discovery began their assault of the 165-mile Bitterroot Mountain Range. Stephen Ambrose, author of *Undaunted Courage*, has called it “one of the great forced marches in history.” Facing near starvation, dangerous conditions, and bone-chilling weather,
the captains pushed their team forward. During the trek’s darkest moments, when the team was reduced to eating candles and horseflesh, the captains gave them hope by venturing out in advance in search of food. The courage that they demonstrated during this period was instrumental in forging the group into a true “Corps of Discovery.”

By refusing to let the team quit, the captains made sure that when they finally emerged from the mountains and saw the vast prairie to the west, the Corps of Discovery knew they were capable of achieving almost anything. And they were right. With little hesitation, the Corps of Discovery hurdled themselves down the dangerous rapids of the Columbia River. Even members who couldn’t swim took the formidable rapids head on—in spite of the fact that indigenous Indians sat on the river banks and watched in morbid fascination as the strangers undertook what they considered a suicidal trip down the violent whitewater rapids.

By early November, they had reached the estuary near the Pacific Ocean and battled wind, rain, massive waves, and huge drift logs for the better part of two weeks until they finally succeeded in crossing over the estuary and reaching the Pacific Coast, an event eloquently captured in William Clark’s immortal words: “Ocean in view! O! the joy.”

Through all of these experiences—from their venture into the unknown at Fort Mandan where they became, in name, the Corps of Discovery to the crucible of the Bitterroots where they were forged into a real team by the experience of shared sacrifice—the captains’ extraordinary leadership was on full display.

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**Infusing the Spirit of Discovery**

Upon reaching the coast, the captains had to decide where to establish their winter camp. Lewis and Clark, as the military commanders, could have simply selected a location and ordered the Corps of Discovery to establish the encampment. But that is not what they did. Rather, they decided to let everyone—including Clark’s black slave, York, and Sacagawea—have an equal say in the decision. It was an unprecedented moment in American history: it was the first truly democratic election west of the Mississippi River. Person by person, the captains polled each member. In so doing, Lewis and Clark preceded their country by 60 and 115 years respectively in recognizing that every person regardless of race or sex brings real value to a team. It is by this act that the Corps of Discovery could be said to be a team not just in name and body but in spirit as well.

That this event occurred on the shores of the Pacific, after they had just conquered the unknown, isn’t a coincidence. By this point, the captains had found that the journey of discovery was not so much an exploration of physical space as it was an exploration and discovery of themselves and one another. What they found was that the future could best be discovered by individuals who had been provided the opportunity first to discover their own full value. Those individuals, once empowered, quickly came to realize that even greater things could be accomplished in partnership with others.

All of the captains’ leadership skills—respect, trust, shared sacrifice, concern, optimism, courage, persistence, and a willingness to listen, innovate, and admit mis-
takes—helped cultivate the Corps of Discovery. But there was one thing underlying the foundation and that was the captains’ own unflagging spirit. When Lewis and Clark encountered the powerful Teton Sioux they didn’t back down. When they reached the Great Falls and saw how difficult the portage would be, they did not complain. When they couldn’t find the Shoshone, they never lost confidence. When they peered over the Continental Divide and saw only more mountains, they simply recommitted themselves to their goal. When they grasped the difficulty of the Bitterroots, they marched straight ahead and never wavered. And when they confronted the violent rapids of the Columbia, they tackled them with vigor and confidence. By their very outlook and demeanor, Lewis and Clark helped infuse the Corps of Discovery with their own unflagging spirit.

And the Corps of Discovery would need to continue to rely on this unflagging spirit. For although they had reached the Pacific and were only halfway through their journey, they had used up a full 95 percent of their supplies. To complete the mission, each individual would have to assume new leadership duties and responsibilities. And it is here where the final component of Lewis and Clark’s exceptional leadership skills were exhibited. By this time it is clear that in addition to cultivating a team spirit, the captains had also groomed each team member to “don the cloak of leadership.” As they prepared to depart from Fort Clatsop (their winter camp), Lewis and Clark demonstrated their faith in their men by dispensing with the few trinkets that remained in their possession and trusting each person to trade gainfully with the Indians for a personal supply of food for their return trip. All proved successful, and the team used its limited resources to assail the Columbia and recross the Bitterroots (in half the time). Once over the mountains, the captains split the Corps of Discovery into five separate units and gave each one significant responsibility to explore new areas. To a remarkable degree, every team succeeded. A month later, after exploring in greater detail aspects of the Marias River in the north and the Yellowstone River to the south, the Corps of Discovery rejoined forces in August 1806. Then, with Lewis and Clark at the helm, together they sailed into St. Louis as the most successful team in American history. It was a fitting end to a remarkable journey.