THE PATH OF REASON

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The last words of a dying practice: "We never did it that way!"

It was a leadership course, the summer of 2001, in the New Mexico Rockies. We had picked up the participants Saturday morning and led them to the base camp at 7300 feet elevation. We had 48 hours to "shake them down" and get them ready for the trail. The group had a dentist from North Carolina. He was tired, had failed in one practice, and was pushing too hard in the current practice he was building. We had an environmental scientist from Texas, a hulking but nice quiet guy. The chief operator of Housing for the Aged, from an eastern State, had led youth for ten years and was burned out. He wanted his excitement to be rekindled. The pediatric surgeon from Dallas had been a Navy Seal in Viet Nam and knew he could survive without the others. He knew he could even survive without this course! The comptroller from the international shipping firm continuously played with his folding knife. They nicknamed him "the blade." The youngest was in video production. He had owned his own firm since he was 16, seven years ago. He needed to break the family demands and become his own person. The head engineer of a "back east" State Highway Planning Commission knew map and compass and would keep them from getting lost. The architect from Oklahoma was truly a nice guy. So nice that it was hard for him to make hard decisions. They all wanted the answers for their future and thought a week in the back country would help "clear the cobwebs" and that learning new leadership skills would facilitate their success.

EIGHT IN A GROUP

As the staff facilitator of this group, one group of eight in the course of 48, it was my job to help them learn the leadership skills, to awaken the values and ethics inside each of them, and give their beliefs some form and structure which could be used to lead others. They were eight individuals who had never met, all from different walks of life, all from different parts of the country, and all with different personal agendas. In many ways, this group was like an average veterinary practice, except we changed the leader each day. The job of group leadership was rotated between the eight, with each being accountable for success for 24-hours.

Time management is a tool used to facilitate group development. The dentist knew he was a bad time manager and expected to fail. They cooked their own meals, usually a dehydrated meal which only required heat and water, but the meals had to be ready on time. During the first 24 hours, no meal was on time, the group was never together at the designated time and place to eat, and they felt rushed at every turn. Late on day two, when it was time for a canteen refill from the stream, the eight were ready to go down to the stream. I whispered in the leader's (the dentist) ear, "How many does it take to carry the canteens down and fill them? If it is less than eight, will others have more time to do other things?" He immediately saw the folly of "doing it yourself" and suggested only two take all the canteens so the others could

stay behind, relax, and work on their trail journals and/or meal development. The team rejoiced at the great new idea of sharing the work and trusting others to do the required job for the good of all. They applied the same principle to preparing meals, setting up camp, and doing other group duties. They became more efficient and had more time for personal projects. Not unlike a busy veterinary practice.

On the trail, they needed to hike as a group of eight, not as a group of three and another of five, or two and six, or even four and four. Trail safety required a group of eight. They did not do this for the first two days, and received negative feedback on the safety hazards they created. If one slipped and fell off the trail down the 100 foot drop to the stream below, it would take at least two to stay and mark the trail point (never be alone in the mountains), three more to follow down and be with the fallen comrade, and two others to go for help. Response time might be critical for stopping the bleeding, restoring the airway, or just pulling a pack laden hiker from the rushing mountain water. It would be the responsibility of each to watch out for the other, for safety as well as for success, so they needed to be together. Not unlike a veterinary practice staff.

Near the end of day three on the trail, this developing group came upon another group stopped at a rushing stream. The spring run-off has washed out the log bridges and there was no "dry way" across the icy stream. Immediately they decided to build a bridge for the others, and while they were building, three other groups amassed on the bank, waiting for a "dry way" to cross. The bridge was built, the four groups crossed, thanking this group of "bridge builders." This "bridge building for self and others" recurred three more times that afternoon, before they reached the night camp sight. They were slowed down reaching their destination, but they felt good about what they had done. The following morning at assembly, three of the groups publicly recognized the "bridge builders." The group had become a team by helping others and this team would not be separated ever again. We have seen this in veterinary practices, especially in those very difficult cases requiring a team effort. It feels good!

A TEAM OF EIGHT

Suddenly, the way things "were" did not seem right. The group had become a team. They planned what needed to be done, shared the accountability for the outcomes (not the process), and had more time to do new things. When they wrote a plan in their trail journal, they automatically wrote a second or third plan, in case unforeseen problems derailed the first idea. It was no longer a "yes or no" success or failure. It was a team determination to accomplish the task. Failure gave way to innovation. "We never did it that way," gave way to "Let's try a new way." The team's expectation became to exceed the traditional expectations. Their tenacity and creativity was being recognized by others and the team pride grew.

On day four, the first trail task was to find the staff at a mountain ridge that had been pinpointed on their map(s) the night before. They were not to use any roads, but otherwise could get there however they wanted. The same location was given to all six groups, with an arrival time of 9:30 a.m. being part of the parameters. The staff left early so no one could follow their exit. The six groups had sight of each other,

and one started to go up a jeep trail. The bridge builders followed for a few hundred yards, but then stopped. They realized the map wasn't completely correct, new roads had been built, so they reassessed their plan. Four groups continued up the jeep road while they looked for alternatives. The bridge builders decided to back-track to the last trail crossing and reassess their route from there. They found the appropriate trail by going back, took it, and arrived at the ridge with time to spare. The four groups on the jeep trail arrived 90 minutes late. By stopping to reassess, by going back to a previous turning point, by not following the crowd, the bridge builders had gained efficiency and success. They were happy hikers.

THE RIGHT PATH

The right path for any team is the route the team needs to take to achieve their dream. The vision of the leader must paint the trail markers. The path to success is often obscured by "markers" left by others. Detours abound. The leadership tasking is clear:

1. Decide where it is important to focus your efforts; have clarity of purpose.
2. Decide what resources will be needed to get to that goal and commit them.
3. Make the commitment to action and act decisively.
4. Alter the efforts to reach success, never to fail; don't settle for less.

Many managers are stopped by reduced resources, environmental challenges, more pressing problems, or a host of other excuses. There is only one reason for a leader to stop . . . success! A manager has projects and programs, a leader has a team. True leaders get things done through other people, by a group effort. The skilled manager has taught every group member exactly how to do their job, regularly appraises their compliance, and often scores them on a scale of one to ten, with ten being "the best." The leader instructs the skill, then persuades the team member to accept accountability, followed by coaching to ensure appropriate behavior is reinforced. Only then does the leader delegate the outcome, an outcome which the team member can achieve with innovation, creativity, or variances, since they know the parameters of excellence expected.

The path of reason has room for error for every team member, it allows people to reverse directions and admit mistakes (unlike the PERFECTIONITIS SELF-SURVEY at the end of this article). Celebration replaces chastisement. There is no such thing as a "ten" team member to a true leader. There is not such thing as perfection. Every person needs to be learning each day, even the leader. The path of reason has inverted speed bumps, some may call them the potholes of life, but these are there to allow creativity while ensuring the pace remains reasonable. After successful delegation, the leader becomes a consultant to the team and, when possible, joins with the group to participate in the toils. A great leader understands that new tasks require new training, more persuading, and additional coaching before new delegation occurs. The leader also understands that a new group member requires that the group be reformed into a new and different team. On the path of reason, time for training and group development is never seen as wasted time, these requirements are seen as success needs.

The path of reason is not a busy trail, so the landmarks are sometimes hard to see. There are signs of decay at the edges of the path, where some have lost their dream and direction to a perimeter distraction. The path of reason is seldom a "jeep trail through the mountains." It is more often an individual "vision quest" by a leader who shows the way to others. As one mountain plateau is reached by the team, a new one is identified by the leader. The team is kept together, although the taskings and skills are divided equitability based on individual abilities to learn and develop. The path of reason has internal rewards, like feelings of greatness and compassion, and external signs, such as a team with pride.

As the bridge builder's ex-Navy Seal said at the end of the week, with tears in his eyes, "I have never felt so close to a group of guys since Viet Nam," and my reply was, "I know." May your path of reason make you feel this good about your team.

PERFECTIONITIS

Unrealistic standards can hold back the progress of your practice. Perfectionism saps energy, steals time, and cripples staff development because the perfectionist can't distinguish between high standards and superhuman expectations. If you want to determine your tendencies toward perfectionitis, just agree or disagree with the following statements:

SECTION I: PLANNING AND DECISIVENESS

1. I miss out on a lot because I don't act quickly enough.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
2. I have to admit that I'm a real procrastinator.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
3. I frequently get too caught up in trying to make the right decision by making lists of pros and cons and researching every possible angle.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
4. My vacations are planned meticulously, and I try to stick to the schedules I have made.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
5. I often feel discouraged and frustrated when I haven't completed every item on my list for the day or week.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
6. There are many things I don't do, such as learn a sport or tackle new procedures at work, because I dislike doing things poorly.
   ____Agree ____Disagree

SECTION II: ATTENTION TO DETAIL

1. I get bogged down in details and often don't finish appointments on time.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
2. When I plan presentations, like staff meetings, I include every relevant piece of information, even though it may make the presentation run too long (or bore the staff).
   ____Agree ____Disagree
3. I frequently rewrite my staff's efforts for client handouts or procedures manuals.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
4. I'm often said to bore people with my attention to detail.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
5. Every morning I spend a great deal of time making sure I look just right.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
6. I rewrite handouts and handbooks a number of times -- probably too often.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
7. I've missed practice opportunities because I've been consumed by the nitty-gritty details of getting my day-to-day jobs done.
   ____Agree ____Disagree

SECTION III: PEOPLE SKILLS

1. Too frequently I feel annoyed with my staff, colleagues, or family for failing to keep on schedule with plans we've arranged.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
2. I'd describe myself more as a controlled person than a free spirit.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
3. I probably get impatient too often with the flaws of my staff and co-workers.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
4. In staff meetings, I talk more than I listen. I make a point of correcting people when they've got their facts wrong.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
5. I feel that once people agree to do something in a certain way, they should proceed exactly as we planned.
   ____Agree ____Disagree
6. I hesitate to delegate because I know no one else will be able to do the job right.
   ____Agree ____Disagree

SCORING

If you agreed to three or more questions in any category, take a few steps back and consider how you can set more realistic expectations for yourself and for your poor, overtaxed staff.

The best place to start is to prioritize your duties and devote less attention to those functions that are less important. Consider what the pay-off is for your lofty expectations. Accept the idea that your work is the result of group effort. The success or failure of your practice is never determined by your efforts alone.

The uncommon leader provides the WHAT and WHY of the program, or desired outcome. The staff has been trained to a level of being trusted, so they are empowered to develop the WHO and HOW of the program/outcome. Once the WHO and HOW has been identified, they return to the leadership to jointly set the WHEN, which includes milestones, timelines, and success measures for the outcome expectation(s). The savvy leader occasionally asks team members, "Are we doing enough to allow you to stay on course and get a successful completion?"
The Uncommon Leader is ready to celebrate the progress toward the outcome expectation, even if there were shortfalls, since the questions are usually, "Was everyone involved?", "What did we learn?", "How did the team perceive the progress?", and "What do we need to do better next time?"