

Lessons in Leadership from Luminaries and Lunatics

Sharon Roberts

Roberts & Roberts Associates

Plano, Texas

Phone: 972-596-2956

E-mail: Sharon@R2assoc.com

Website: www.R2assoc.com

You are fenced in. The competition is breathing down your collar. People's jobs are on the line. And, your suppliers have cut you off. Got to think straight. No time to be irrational - or is it? If being rational has gotten you where you are, how is being rational going to get you out of the mess you are in?

This situation could easily describe a multitude of contemporary organizations on any given day. For sure, the times are tough, but we are not unique in history in having to deal with such crises. Consider the following story.

In 1334 A.D., the commandant of the Castle Hochosterwitz, in southern Austria, was facing a desperate situation. The castle, situated atop a rocky hilltop, was surrounded below by the army of the Duchess of Tyrol. The defenders of the castle had fought a gallant battle but their supplies were running low. They were down to their last ox and only two bags of barley. With the end in sight, the commandant of the castle weighed his options. Rationally it would appear that two courses of action were available: either fight to the bloody end or else surrender the castle and face the wrath of the attackers. The lord of the castle decided to do something that would appear to defy reason, at least by most standards. First he had the ox slaughtered and the carcass stuffed with the two remaining bags of barley. Then he had the defenders throw it over the walls of the castle so that it would land directly in front the opposing army's encampment below.

Lunatic thing to do, you say? Maybe so, but in this case it had the effect of demoralizing the Duchess' army. She and her troops saw it as an act of defiance on the part of the defenders. "What message are they trying to send?" she may have thought. The Duchess may have interpreted it as meaning, "We are prepared to fight to the death," or "We have more than enough supplies to continue this battle as long as you want." In any case, it had the desired outcome: the Duchess immediately withdrew her army and the castle was saved from siege.

Seldom do we face such life-and-death situations, but it is possible to draw parallels between this story and the business situation described in the beginning. In one way or another, modern

organizations are almost always under attack. Profits are in peril, jobs are in danger, and the competition is in relentless pursuit, much like the army of the Duchess of Tyrol. If the choices were easy and the outcomes were certain, there would be little need for a leader.

It would seem hard to make a case for irrational behavior, but, as the previous story illustrates, what is or isn't rational is not necessarily what the majority would agree upon. Leaders, effective leaders that is, have to make hard choices - choices that often fly in the face of conventional wisdom. Certainly, it takes insight to even conceive of possible actions that don't fit the norm. That's vision. But it also takes guts to take an unpopular stand. And that's courage.

History is rich with examples of luminary leaders - those brave men and women who often come out of nowhere to take charge of a challenging situation and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Their methods have inspired numerous books and more than a few documentaries. Luminaries come from all walks of life and from every position within the organization. But before earning the label of luminary they often look and act more like lunatics - at least to critics who stand ready to tell them as much if things don't work out. Crazy times call for unconventional methods and there are timely, profound, often humorous, lessons to be learned from those who are not bound by tradition.

No doubt about it, leadership is the "hot issue" of the day. Why? For the simple reason that far too many organizations are over-managed and under-led - especially considering the turbulent times in which we live. Of course, management and leadership go hand-in-hand - but being successful at one doesn't guarantee success at the other.

Aren't the words management and leadership used interchangeably? Perhaps so, and if so that's part of the problem. Effective management is critical to the day-to-day operation of an organization - keeping it on track, implementing plans, meeting commitments. Leadership, on the other hand, is what's required when significant change is necessary, change that threatens the stability of the organization in some way. What's more, management is 80 percent science and 20 percent art. Leadership is just the opposite, 20 percent science and 80 percent art. For this reason, one prominent CEO has aptly compared management to the act of conducting a symphony orchestra and leadership to the act of directing a jazz ensemble. Jazz is a form of structured chaos (as contradictory as that may sound) while a symphony can only work when every player knows the "score" and what's expected of them. But even with jazz, there is a certain method to the apparent madness. Furthermore, great jazz artists of the present are avid students of the great jazz legends. Leadership, like jazz, can be studied, emulated, and improved upon, regardless of (or in spite of) innate abilities.

In today's volatile world, every organization has to deal with change in order to thrive or just survive. Or, as Will Rogers said, "Even if you are on the right track, you'll get ran over by the train if you are not moving." Leadership is neither an option nor something to be delegated or decreed by endowing someone with a lofty title. Leaders understand people - and people, we all know, don't always behave like a well-oiled machine. Press the accelerator on your car and it'll go faster - try pushing someone outside their comfort zone and they'll rebel.

Not to worry, you say, our managers can handle anything. Could be, but it's asking a lot to expect a manager who's a whiz at running an 8-to-5 service department, for example, to be

equally effective at revamping the service department to handle calls on a 24-hour basis. Neither the manager nor the managed are likely to accept this kind of change with eager enthusiasm.

Luminary leaders, perhaps disguised as lunatics, are not swayed by can't-do attitudes. They know how to span the chasm between where you are and where you need to be. When you are safely on the other side, the task of managing can begin again, as it should.

Making the transition from manager to leader and leader to manager is a necessity in today's world. What's more, the notion of what constitutes an effective leader is itself in transition, due largely to the fact that "knowledge work" is better accomplished in networks rather than hierarchies. In my opinion, there will never be a definitive "rule book" on effective leadership mainly because the interaction between humans, technology, politics, and the economy is forever changing. But, without a rule book, where does this leave us? To me it suggests that we need to pay greater attention to the 80 percent of leadership that is an art rather than the 20 percent that might be codified in a rule book.

Here are some brief suggestions for moving in this direction. First, recognize that the distinction between a leader and a manager is more than semantics. You'll also need to know when the timing is right to wear one hat or the other. Then I would urge you to examine your leadership development strategy, if you have one. Is it predicated on the assumptions that are more in line with the industrial era than the information age? Does it truly speak to leadership or is it simply another formulaic approach to management? Next, I would ask you to pay attention to certain kinds of challenges and how they are labeled, for instance, "performance problems" or "unfair competition." The unpleasant news is that these may be leadership problems in disguise. The good news is they are often "treatable" in the care of effective leadership.

Finally - and this is an act of leadership itself - I recommend that you align your leadership development strategy with the realities of a doing business in the information age and in a global economy. Test your metaphors. Listen to your words. Question your role models. True, there are lessons to be learned from military heroes and sports figures, but the analogy of "engaging in battle" or "winning a game" can be dangerous if carried too far in today's business environment. Keep in mind that there are powerful, pertinent lessons in leadership to be learned from unsung heroes who started out looking like lunatics and ended up shining like luminaries.

About the Author

Sharon Roberts is president and co-founder of Roberts & Roberts Associates, a Texas-based management consulting firm established in 1990. Sharon is a personal coach, keynote speaker, and seminar leader with clients ranging from law firms, to product manufacturers, to service contractors. Her engaging, content-rich speeches have been heard by tens of thousands throughout North America. She is also the author and co-author of two books including the path-breaking book: *Selling To Woman & Couples: Secrets of Selling in the New Millennium*—a book that many companies have adopted as required reading for their sales and marketing professionals. Sharon has appeared on CNN, Let's Talk Business Radio in New York and numerous other mass media forums. She holds a degree in business and public relations from the University of Texas.



For information on coaching, seminars, keynotes,
publications, or consultation, contact Sharon at:

972-596-2956

Sharon@R2assoc.com

Also visit her website at www.R2assoc.com