

LEADERSHIP & RAILROADS



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David Ruhman has a passion for the deep integration of academic knowledge and technical skill training through real-world, contextualized learning; delivered in dynamic, relevant, 21st-century coaching process for evaluation and needs assessment. He lives for connecting individuals, departments and organizations with successful growth and improvement planning through leadership development and policy analysis. His process involves engaging and re-engaging individuals, departments and organizations in the pursuit of a life-long commitment to intellectual, social and emotional growth to achieve optimal professional development.

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What a Railroad Can Teach You About Leadership

by David Ruhman, Ed. S.

I've Been Working on the Railroad

Effective leadership is fashioned through activities, which chisel away excess material revealing the masterpiece within. One summer I learned a lot about leadership working with troubled and troubling teens constructing a rail system for a local historical society in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. What I learned about leadership resulted from specific steps executed in the construction of the track. The project revealed three distinct lessons regarding leadership. The result of the investment made in the project and the people was an increased capacity to exercise effective leadership skills.

This article will detail the first in a series of three lessons learned during the construction of a small-scale, full-sized rail system for a local historical society. In subsequent installments, the second and third lessons will be shared. Each lesson stands alone; however, the three lessons combine to produce a compound effect. Personal application of each lesson is suggested to aid the reader in maximizing the transferability of the applied concept.

Lesson #1: - To shape individual leadership skills requires varying amounts of tension.

The first observation on arrival to the site was that all of the rails to be used in the project were straight pieces of steel. Additionally, no new materials were available for construction. All of the rails and rail ties were taken from projects where tracks were removed to reduce environmental and occupational hazards. Somehow, I had convinced myself that a variety of rails in differing shapes would be required; however, all I saw was a stack of used, straight rails. I wondered to myself how the project would be possible.

It did not take long to learn straight rails would fit our every need for laying an oval track. Using rail spikes, a wench, and a pick-up truck, we began to pull the straight rails in small enough increments to ensure that the track stayed on-design and provided the longest possible ride for the tourists. As we got the surprisingly flexible rail into position, spikes were driven into the rail ties to secure the shape of the track with each foot we moved forward. We never cut the rail. Neither were we required to make other adjustments to the rails to ensure the track came together at the starting point. Vision of the whole project required faith and confidence in the integrity of the rail enthusiasts who designed the project. So, the project began on a straight strait stretch and matched-up perfectly when we came back to the starting point.

Leadership reflects similar characteristics. The tension put into the rails allowed the crew to shape them and create the path designed for the steam engine to navigate. In individuals and organizations, leadership skills must adapt to challenges created by various circumstances. Some of the challenges stretch the organization and leader in directions that take stamina to survive. Some of the challenges put tension on the organization and leader to hold things in place so productivity is achieved without

becoming derailed. Tension and challenges produce change and bring shape to the organization. If the process is completed so that there is a firm foundation, the organization experiences years of productive outcomes and growth.

The ability to incorporate and guide tension in the business plan is vital to creating a track to guide best practice. Building an oval track from straight pieces of steel rail taught me the importance of using tension to one's advantage in shaping the course of a business plan. Maintaining the right amount of tension in the appropriate direction determines what course businesses follow in daily practice. In the next installment of this series, the importance of constant evaluation and review is compared to the need for two tracks to be kept parallel and equally spaced to ensure the locomotive and passenger cars remain on the track from point-to-point in a rail system.

Leadership Requires Constant Evaluation

In the first installment of this series I drew a parallel between the tension needed to flex a straight piece of steel to create an oval train track and the tension necessary to create growth in business professionals and organizations. In the second part of this series I will discuss the importance of constant evaluation and review and compare that to the need for two tracks to be kept parallel and equally spaced to ensure the locomotive and passenger cars remain on track from point-to-point in a rail system.

Parallel tracks warrant that passengers will remain safe from point-to-point in a rail system. To ensure that a track is parallel requires the installers to constantly evaluate and assess the distance between the two rails. In our project, the construction supervisor kept assessing our placement of the rails before allowing us to drive spikes in the rail ties and secure the track in place.

Lesson #2: - Leadership requires constant evaluation and review.

The foundation that an organization establishes is similar to how we guaranteed the track was laid appropriately to carry the train from a designated starting point to the corresponding end point. The crew was required to certify every rail would safely carry tourists around the historical grounds. In laying the track, the tension and shaping of the rail was only as effective as the care given to ensure the tracks were parallel and equally spaced in relation to each other. The train, without parallel tracks, was sure to derail resulting in broken equipment and lives. The most important tool used in the project evaluated and assessed the distance between the two lines of rails.

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The rail enthusiasts we worked with continually evaluated and assessed the distance between the two rails with a simple tool made from a piece of wood cut to ensure that when placed between the two rails the distance from one side to the other was constant and matched the width between the two wheels on the steam engine and the cars that carried passengers. Even the slightest divergence in the space between the rails required action to eliminate the deviation. It was not long into the project before the work crew knew the importance of the spacing tool and the need to measure our achievement in placing the rails on the ties in the appropriate alignment.

In organizational leadership, similar tools are required to ensure that the progress being made is measurable and meeting the desired outcomes. We measured in small increments to ensure that a small deviation did not result in a significant problem. In addition, we all faced the reality that

honesty was better than denial in using the information we found using our spacing device. Evaluation and assessment do not always require complicated formulas or tools. Many times a simple device will provide the necessary data to achieve consistent performance. Consistent performance will ensure foundational results. And, foundational results will establish a long-term path to organizational and individual growth and development.

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Adaptation to the benefits of tension and constant evaluation of progress ensure business practices guide individuals and organizations toward desired outcomes. Evaluation and assessment also aid the individual and organization in measuring progress toward ensuring the satisfaction of customers and elimination of issues related to defective products and services. The third, and final, lesson in this series will parallel the need to secure the track for the long-term and the importance of implementing a business plan which sets the course for practice and productivity.

My goal is that you will be able to identify tensions and how these opportunities contribute to the success of the established business plan. Additionally, I want you to be able to identify available methods for evaluation and assessment of a business plan to yield desired outcomes. In the final installment of this series, I will identify individual and organizational markers to aid you in securing a successful completion of a business plan long after it is established.

Leadership Requires Making It Permanent

In previous installments, I have been trying to challenge you to accept and use tension as a tool for establishing best practices. In addition, I have challenged you to use constant evaluation for ensuring the course of business is following the stated business plan. In this installment, I want to challenge and encourage you to recognize markers for ensuring integrity long after the business plan is established.

On the railroad project, the importance of this concept was evidenced in the need to set the rail in small units such that the shape and integrity of the track were established to carry the locomotive and passenger cars over the long haul. The project utilized spikes and spike plates every few feet to ensure the shape of the track was maintained. The project required the crew to think both short-term and long-term when securing the track. An outdoor track will experience a wide variety of weather and use conditions requiring each plate to hold its position and maintain the shape of the track. The same principle impacts effective business leadership.

Lesson #3 - Leadership requires "markers" to be established.

Tension created shape and shape allowed the crew to lay a course for the business of providing rides to tourists. A spacing tool ensured that our course was useful to the steam engine used to transport tourists from a loading zone back to the point of origination without disruption and injury. The final aspect of constructing the track reflecting leadership related to how the track was held in the designated shape long after the project was completed. In other words, getting the rail to the desired shape was only one part of the process. After the crew got it to the desired shape, there needed to be a method to hold it in place long after the crew left the premises.

Use markers to establish and ensure individual and organizational integrity long after the work is completed.

The crew used spikes and spike plates to achieve the desired outcome. Spikes were driven into plates that stretched over the bottom of the rail. Placing these plates on both sides of the rail allowed us to ensure that movement of the track would not occur. Establishing foundational shape is required because, if the tension on the rail weakened, the rail would return to a state of homeostasis – straight.

Driving spikes requires some level of talent, but it was vital for the crew to ensure the rail maintained shape under all conditions. The crew worked to ensure that rail ties were solid, the spikes were completely driven into place, and spikes were spaced appropriately so as to maintain appropriate tension on the rail. Since we were in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, consideration was exercised for extreme weather conditions applicable to the area.

Leadership requires a similar type of action. Organizational and individual leadership require markers similar to spike plates, which hold practices in place given internal and external influences upon the organization or individual. Ensuring that the right kind of foundation is in place and the track of business is secure provides assurance business practices produce the desired result. Choosing the right position for business markers is half of the process. Individual leaders and organizations also need to utilize proper mechanisms to secure the track of business to prevent derailment.

Check back here next week and I will tie all of this together and provide some closing thoughts. Don't let this "train of thought" leave the station without you!

Building It By Hand

I fondly remember the experience of constructing a rail line with a group of social cast-offs during two summer vacations. And in this concluding segment, I want to share with you a few final thoughts and the leadership lessons that I learned constructing a small rail system by hand.

I learned from the design and implementation of the activity. I learned from observation of the completed project when I visited the area. I learned from hearing the appreciation of tourists who commented on the opportunity to take a steam train ride in this rural community.

The project married a passion for trains (the historical society members provided this) and good old fashion muscle (the youth provided this). It has been said that strong backs created strong tracks on this project. Even today when I observe tourists riding the rails, a sense of accomplishment and pride in the work still results. Little is known about the workers who did this project, but the tourists do not seem to care.

A Change in Perspective and Practice

The experience impacted my perspective on business leadership in profound ways. The activity changed my practice and view of leadership in significant ways. Over time I became a more effective leader as a result of this project. The most important result of this experience was seeing how attention to detail allows the rail line to remain in operation long after the project was completed. In addition, the response of tourists allowed the historical society to maintain the tracks through tourist donations and purchase of tickets. The steam engine continues to carry passengers safely around the grounds of the historical society allowing some to experience what they knew in the past and a new generation to experience a lost art. The project is still a source of successful promotion of the historical society served by the project.

In the practice of leadership, the challenge remains to lead by using tension to shape a viable business plan. In addition, the practice of constant evaluation and analysis ensures that there is a measurement of results, which provide the assurance of a successful business plan. Finally, the establishment of markers to hold things in place allow the individual and organization confidence that the track of business is established and successful.

Leadership requires individuals and organizations to maintain focus. This project was no different. From beginning to end, the project of constructing a rail system required constant attention to details. Successful businesses have leaders who motivate others to maintain an attention to details.

It may have been a small construction project, but this was a huge lesson in leadership. Sometimes the best lessons come in unexpected packages.

Who knew you could learn so much about leadership from the construction of a railroad.
