

Underground Leadership: New Depths of Leadership Discovered

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Leadership qualities run deep

Here's a situation that, as a leader, you might recognise: You are suddenly facing an unexpected and massive challenge. You have prepared for such challenges in principle, but this is no drill; it is suddenly, horribly real. Your team has a range of experience in what they do, but none of them has done this before. Your adequate resources are made unprecedentedly inadequate by the change in situation. Each of the team sees their very future directly dependent on the next series of choices and decisions you make. They look to you as their leader.

What are you going to do?

This question was ably answered by Luis Urzua in a clear demonstration of a Leader-Manager in action under extreme pressure. He effectively led his team through their challenge:

- He created a central focus for them in order to hold them together as a team
- He showed care and concern for each of his team members
- He was aware of, and encouraged, each person's individual identity within the team, making it clear that each person mattered

He efficiently managed the available resources to overcome the challenge:

- He created the optimal physical environment by using his knowledge of what resources were available
- He allocated consumable resources evenly and fairly among the team.
- He used resources in a planned, specific way in order to achieve results that were beneficial to the team.

In case you haven't guessed already, Luis Urzua is what the BBC referred to as "supervisor" and other news sources called "commander" of the shift of 33 gold and copper miners rescued in Chile after being trapped nearly a half-mile underground by 700,000 tons of rock for 69 days.

How did Luis do it?

The news reports have focused on the "miracle" of the rescue, and it is indeed an amazing event. Read these reports through a leadership lens and there are some identifiable actions that Luis Urzua took in order to move the process away from disaster and towards its ultimate amazing success. He seems to have balanced his twin roles of Leader and Manager to good effect.

He effectively *led* his team

- He created a central focus for them in order to hold them together as a team; for example, they were heard singing Chile's national anthem with strong voices.
- He showed care and concern for each of his team members. An Associated Press article on 13 October 2010 quoted Robinson Marquez, who once worked with Urzua in a nearby mine, as saying, "He is very protective of his people and obviously loves them."
- He was aware of, and encouraged each person's individual identity within the team, making it clear that each person mattered. The media surrounding the mine reporting the arrival of the rescued miners referred to them individually by the separate identities. The author, Eva Vergara, wrote, "The 55-year-old miner who led a prayer group followed the 26-year-old former security guard who helped manage packages sent down to the miners. The one who while trapped asked his wife of 25 years to renew their wedding vows was followed by the one who went underground to pay for his son's medical school. The miner colleagues referred to as "Dr. House" after the TV character preceded the one who monitored gas levels in the pit and sent readings to the surface".

He efficiently *managed* the available resources

- He created the optimal physical environment by using his knowledge of what resources were available. He used his experience of the mine and the dark space they were locked in for the 17 daunting frightening days, to keep his men calm and stay in control until rescuers could make their first contact with them.
- He allocated consumable resources evenly and fairly among the team. The men had only a 48 hours emergency food supply but through efficient resource management Luis made it last more than 2 1/2 weeks. It took his strength, and their trust, to get the miners into a regimen where they took minuscule drops of milk and spoonfuls of tuna fish every second day.
- He used resources in a planned, specific way in order to achieve results that were beneficial to the team. They used a bulldozer to penetrate a natural water deposit, providing drinking water and a waterfall that they could use to shower. Operation of such vehicles was limited and structured in order to minimize contamination of the available air.

Could you be a Luis?

Luis Urzua had the mother of all burning platforms to work from in applying his leadership. I would hope that none of us finds ourselves in similarly awful circumstances; however, the question should be asked – are there applications of Luis's behaviors that we can use in the "normal" workplace?
Effectively lead your team

- Centralized focus can be generated in a shared understanding of a set of genuinely valuable objectives, in a unified sense of purpose and a distinct team identity.

- Care and concern are expressed in frequent and genuine interest in, and engagement with, the team. Your acute sense of its well-being and your actions to maintain a high standard of collegiality among all members set the tone from the top for a team that will take care of each other in tough times.
- Individual identity matters within the team structure. Identifying and using each person's expertise and experience for the team's mutual benefit strengthens the potential of the team and the resolve of each person within it.

Efficiently manage your available resources

- Create the optimal physical environment for success by using what you have appropriately in a balance between getting the job done and satisfying the personal drivers of the team. Don't sacrifice one for the other or you'll lose both.
- Don't get sucked in by those who make the most noise in the clamor for limited resources. Be transparent in both what resources you are allocating and why you are allocating them that way. Create distribution that will be seen as even and fair.
- Structure the consumption of resources. Use your resources in a task-relevant way in order to achieve specified results.

Lessons Learned

Buried within this marvelous story of human endurance and ingenuity, we find three critical lessons in the fundamentals of leadership and teamwork:

Leadership Lesson #1 – Solid Leader-Manager practices are sources of strength in, and are even more crucial during, the most dramatic of situations. Learn the fundamental skills of leading effectively and managing efficiently now so that you can rely on them when under extreme pressure.

Leadership Lesson #2 – Great leaders function on two levels: the systemic level and the symbolic level. The systemic level is where they should make the best practical choices to increase the efficiency of their team and its resources in order to meet its goals. And the symbolic level is where they should make the best decisions that raise the spirit of their team so that motivation was maintained.

Leadership Lesson #3 – We never know when we will be called upon to motivate and manage others, but we can know our strengths so that we are ready when the moment comes.