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Leadership - styles and frameworks – May 2004

Guin Batten recently set a new world record crossing the English Channel in a single scull (rowing boat). Not only is Guin the first woman to do so, but she crossed faster than any other human before her. Here we look at Guin's leadership styles to illustrate the wide variety of skills required to make a team come together for a common purpose.

"If I have any regrets, it was that no one was there when I set my foot down on French sand. The chase boat was standing off shore in deep water. It was a private moment, but I forgot to switch out of "do-do" mode into "victory" mode," said Guin Batten on completing an historic channel crossing.

Being the leader is at times a solitary experience. As the maxim goes, 'it is lonely at the top'. Whether celebrating an extraordinary success, as Guin has, or whether you are learning from mistakes that make you feel like you are in your very own dark chasm where no one can help you, the ability to switch your leadership style in order to move forward, and to keep your team with you, is essential.

Based on real world evidence, Getfeedback has designed a framework that explores all the primary attributes of successful leadership, and the consequence of not acting on them when necessary. Guin's story illustrates the framework perfectly. For instance, had Guin not been able to consistently switch from a mode of information search to one of influence, she would not have been able to build the trust and support of a diverse group of people that helped her achieve her goal and break a world record.

From the outset, Guin displayed a complex mix of behaviours that positioned her well to kick-start the process that would end in the success of the challenge. Information search, facilitating interaction, being an inspiring communicator and the ability to form concepts were all attributes that Guin used to glue the elements of her ambition together.

At the concept stage, Guin describes the power of simply going with your beliefs. With her facility to inspire others, translating her concepts into reality became second nature. She says, "There is nothing more exhilarating than doing something that hasn't been done before. Going with your beliefs, proving the doubters wrong and coming home with a smile on your face."

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The ambition fixed, now it was about fact finding and building a core team. Describing the first stages of the challenge Guin said, "Initially I had to identify a boat that could stand up to the environment, a chance meeting that developed into a good relationship with the owner of Resolute Racing, kick started the challenge. I needed to get over the bureaucracy and red tape of the British and French Coast Guard, so by working with local experts on the ground, a Fisherman from Folkestone called Andy King, we were able to go. These guys had the local know how and a huge bank of local knowledge of the waters, weather, tide and shipping in the Straits. It was invaluable. But they were not used to dealing with rowers and they were expensive. So this is where my sponsors came in."

Guin's personal contacts with three directors of the three firms, Applied Weighing, Allied Catering and MEK-TEK UK helped. A set price for branding on the boat and kit, and if they wished a set price for an appearance or a presentation at a time of their choosing. Two other sponsors in kind were able to provide clothing, which were as important as they helped create a team identity and reduced other costs. On top of this was the PR, the photographer and the official time keeper.

The ability to seek information impacts directly onto a leaders strategic capability. Failure to get the right information leaves a leader blind, open to lost opportunities and a dread feeling of being 'out of the loop'. Done well, making information search a core competency of leadership behaviour keeps them ahead, maintains objectivity and provides foresight. In Guin's case she needed a lot of information. The English Channel is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, hence the formidable bureaucracy that surrounds anyone foolhardy enough to want to cross it by their own human power. A tiny boat surrounded by 4 metre waves would not be seen by tankers and other ships. Guin's relentless information search would prove to be vital for her personal survival.

Funding an expedition like this is expensive. Guin's skill in facilitating interaction with others and inspiring her sponsors paved the way to an open relationship with a wide and diverse group of people. Everyone had a shared goal; they all wanted Guin to cross successfully, and to do well. Politics and turf wars often thwart people unable to facilitate interaction, a scenario often seen as 'divide and rule'. Not healthy, and demonstrably damaging to any organisational ambition. Inspire your team and you can help enable more clarity in a common purpose, without which others are left confused and in the dark.

"On the water I knew decisions were going to be tricky. Communication was poor and as I tired I became less and less capable of making the best decisions. My job was to row as hard and as

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fast as I safely could. The chase boat and the team had to take complete responsibility for my navigation. As we got closer to France this became more and more important. As the tide began pushing me off course it was very hard to accept an instruction to steer away from France, but I knew I had to and I did."

Guin describes here the outcomes of her ability to empower actions and enable openness. Giving others responsibility for their actions, making them in charge of the destiny of a project actually gets things done. The obverse is to instill a blame culture, a sense of impotency and in the end very little ever happens. Guin had to invest trust in her team and she was able to do this by being open at the outset and directive about what she required of them. Thereafter, the trust and openness she invested came back in the support and responsibility demonstrated by the others at crucial times in the challenge. By being open, you build trust and understanding which helps everyone feel involved and valued. Without it, there is invariably a culture of suspicion and alienation. Not good if you then have to depend on someone else to make sure you stay alive.