

The Lion Tamer Metaphor & Leadership

By Mickey Straub

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Question: What does a Lion Tamer bring with him inside the ring?

Answer: A whip and a chair.

Question: The reason for the whip is obvious, but why does he bring the chair?

A few years back, the film maker Errol Morris made a fascinating documentary called *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*, in which a lion tamer explains that he brandishes a chair at an enraged big cat to confuse it and dissipate its anger.

The animal is biologically programmed to focus on one thing and then attack it. When the lion tamer holds up a chair, the big cat sees four things and all of a sudden, he has four points of interest-the four legs of the chair-and doesn't know which one to focus its anger. The lion has a one-track mind. He loses his original train of thought and gets completely distracted, which dissipates the rage. It's basically animal psychology.

What does this have to do with leadership?

Traces of this phenomenon can be seen in a variety of scenarios, but there are few places where the power of having a singular focus is more apparent than in leadership.

Southwest Airline's inspired their crew from the very beginning with a mission, "To make flying affordable for everyone" and they continue to do so today. Lou Gerstner, was credited with helping turn around IBM in the 1990's, when he demanded that managers work together to re-establish IBM's mission as a customer-focused provider of computing solutions and to be the #1 computer outsource in the world. Lee Iacocca's battle cry was "Made in America!" and we all know that Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream and Ronald Reagan wanted to make America strong and proud. These leaders had one thing in common: they all rallied their people behind a concentrated purpose...and their success speaks volumes.

At a recent conference, LAMP 2006, GAMA brought in a main platform speaker who was a former Navy commander of the U.S.S. Benfold, Captain Michael D. Abrashoff. The theme of "The best damn ship in the Navy," became the battle cry and goal for the entire crew and they had incredible results. Once one of the worst performing ships, it rose to one of the best, winning the coveted Spokane Trophy in 1998 for being the most combat-ready ship in the Pacific fleet. In addition, they had the all-time highest score in gunnery, scoring 104.4 out a possible 105 points. To top it off, their dismal retention rate rose from twenty eight percent to one hundred percent and they did it while operating on just 75% of their budget.

Having a singular purpose may not have been the only factor for these remarkable turnarounds, but it played a major part. We can learn a lot from this metaphor because human beings have the same tendency to get overwhelmed and/or distracted if we have too many things to focus on. Without a clear focus, we often become paralyzed.

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