

Leadership

Ann Ashley



Leadership in Adversity

Way back in 1884, a Canadian lad of 17 went to work on a sailing ship. His name was Joe Boyle, and he was looking for adventure.

His shipmates were resentful of him. They were on board because they had to work for a living and Joe was “just a rich kid looking for fun.” Although they couldn’t dampen his cheerful attitude or stop him from learning the art of seamanship, they made his life a misery.

One day a terrible storm rose up off the coast of South Africa. The ship inevitably started to take on water. I say inevitably because, as you sailors out there know, a Captain who allows ill feeling to fester below decks is a Captain who permits his ship to fall into disrepair.

The pumping went on for days in miserable and frightening conditions. As the weary crew began to despair, Joe remained cheerful and confident. He countered their hopelessness with optimism—he was determined that all would survive.

When the exhausted men cried they could no longer work the heavy pumps, Joe would use taunts. “I’m a better man than you are,” he would say, and match them stroke for stroke. He used humour:

“We can’t be shipwrecked here; there are no women on this coast!” And kindness and common sense: “I’ll do your turn; you go get something to eat.”

At the height of the storm, lightning struck the main mast, snapping it in half. Now the danger was acute. The mast—trailing tattered sails and rigging—hung over the side of the ship like an anchor. As the wreckage began to drag the bow round, the ship started to wallow in a trough; she was in grave danger of broaching.

“We can’t be shipwrecked here; there are no women on this coast!”

Joe—assuming an authority he did not have—shouted his orders over the screaming wind. **“You two: cut that rigging free! You two: help the steersman! Bring her head round! Do it now!”**

As in all good stories—and this one is true—the hero lived to tell the tale. The crew accepted Joe Boyle’s leadership, and when he ended his voyage three years later, he was First Mate.

He had learned that confidence comes from knowledge, that an optimistic attitude has a positive effect on everyone, and that nothing is gained from pessimism. And he found from experience that common sense instructions, given firmly and with conviction, would always be obeyed.

Colourful Joe Boyle went on to make a large personal fortune in the Klondike Gold Rush, and did voluntary service in Russia in the First World War. No stranger to conflict, he seemed to welcome adversity. And whether he had the authority or not, he always took the lead.

To get people to follow your lead—the one truly essential indicator of leadership—find out all there is to know about your job, radiate confidence, and show by good example. As an ancient Persian poet once said, *He who knows, and knows he knows, he is a leader: Follow him.* ▲

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