

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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## MANAGING

### ***Lead like a pirate? Shiver me timbers!***

**Ship captains knew how to build teams, inspire loyalty and use incentives to motivate, coach ROBERT GARROW tells WALLACE IMMEN**

Why would a captain of industry want to lead like a pirate? After all, didn't pirates recruit with a bludgeon, rule by intimidation and force anyone who complained to take a dive off the plank?

Think again, says Robert Garrow, the president of Ottawa-based coaching company Pirate Leadership.

He's found that many of the most successful captains of pirate ships were actually enlightened team builders who could teach modern managers a thing or two about motivation and leadership.

"The best pirates knew the value of creating strong teamwork and loyalty, using rewards to inspire performance, setting strategic goals and executing them, and being ready to innovate," says Mr. Garrow, who studied the histories of pirates who roamed the Caribbean and Canada's Atlantic provinces for his book *Ahoy Mates, Leadership Lessons from Successful Pirates*.

"Being a pirate was not really about show or swagger but about developing a frame of mind that was focused and ready for anything, then constantly motivating the team to perform at its full potential," adds Mr. Garrow, who runs managing seminars dressed like a swashbuckler, complete with tricorne hat and eye patch.

Here are a few lessons that Mr. Garrow, whose background is in strategic planning, says the captains of the pirate era can teach the captains of today:

#### **Get buy-in from your crew**

Many pirates were unemployed sailors who had been stranded by previous employers in ports far from home, either because a war had ended and they were no longer on a navy payroll or because there was no work on commercial ships.

A pirate ship captain couldn't offer the crew a regular wage but could inspire hard work and loyalty by using a version of today's profit-sharing plans: Crew members were shareholders in a venture and got a percentage of the proceeds for their effort and co-operation.

The lesson: a feeling of ownership and control is a powerful motivator.

It works at modern start-up tech companies, he says, where people work night and day because they're all in on the decision-making -- and the profit.

### **Play to your strengths**

Pirate captains were daring risk-takers but, stereotypes to the contrary, they were never foolhardy, he found.

"To be a pirate, you didn't have to be the biggest and meanest bully on the block -- you had to be the smartest," he says.

For pirates, that meant using fast, shallow-draft ships that could sail over coral reefs to escape from heavy warships that couldn't pursue them because they risked having their bottoms ripped out.

Pirates also carefully calculated their risks, picking their targets to gain maximum benefits, while avoiding confrontations that could blow them out of the water.

"Pirates would avoid battles, because getting injured or having your ship burn or sink could end their careers," Mr. Garrow says. "What's the point of putting in all that effort if your ship sinks to the bottom with all the gold?"

Today's decision makers also need to assess their relative strengths and plan strategies that use them to maximum advantage, Mr. Garrow says.

"It is important to stay in charge of how you are going to compete and not let someone else dictate the tactics," he advises.

### **Have respect for your crew**

Bad captains of buccaneer enterprise may have abused their crews, but they didn't last long, he says.

In fact, pirate ships were more democratic organizations than you might think. On many ships, the crew elected the officers; they discussed where they were going to sail and voted on it. And they drew up rules of conduct that applied to everyone, including the captain.

Though pirate captains were chief officers and had to be obeyed, there were checks on their behaviour to ensure fair treatment of the crew. The pirate had to answer to the quartermaster, an officer who acted like a human resources manager, on the ship. And crews got to vote on the longevity of a captain: If a captain was abusing people, he would be voted out by the crew on the next trip.

And while pirates also didn't waste time coddling trouble makers, interestingly, Mr. Garrow says he hasn't been able to find any references to the infamous walk off the plank. "That's been embellished by Hollywood," he says.

Problem employees were generally booted off ashore to fend for themselves, the equivalent in modern terms of ordering someone to clear out their desk and escorting them to the door.

Modern managers also have to show respect for their staff, offering fair treatment, rewarding top performers and not letting weaker ones harm the team, Mr. Garrow says.

### **Scan the horizon for opportunities**

The most successful pirates didn't just sail off in any direction there was an available target, but picked their prey along a certain coast, Mr. Garrow says.

And, "just as pirates scan the horizon looking for storms and the sails of ships to plunder, you have to be on the lookout for risks and opportunities," Mr. Garrow says.

Because success invariably breeds competitors, it is important to keep track of them.

Smart pirate ships horned in on even the most successfully pirated territories. Good pirate captains -- and captains of business today -- should always be studying the competition, and encouraging their crews to look for weaknesses in their rivals' strategies, he says.

Just as important is to be ready to change position if there are shifts in the market or changes in technology that threaten your dominance.

Pirates changed territories when it became clear that merchant ships, their target market, were changing routes to avoid their area.

### **Share the success as well as the treasure**

Good pirate captains knew that regular praise and recognition were as important as money to the crew.

Because pirates were given say in the way decisions were made, and received thanks in the form of acknowledgement and a share of the booty, they tended to develop a deep respect for their captain as well as their shipmates. There was no place else they would rather be, Mr. Garrow says.

The lesson here is that good leaders get performance payback from acknowledging the contributions staff are making, Mr. Garrow says.

"Look at the people at Microsoft. Many of them are millionaires because of their stock options, but they still keep on working hard because of the praise and recognition they receive."

### **Leaven the work with play**

Pirates also teach that it is important not to get so caught up in the grind toward success that you drive people to the breaking point, Mr. Garrow says.

Navy ships in the eighteenth century could be pretty grim and authoritarian workplaces compared with pirate ships. Naval officers were not known for their senses of humour, and strictly rationed the rum and opportunities for relaxation. Mr. Garrow says.

"I found that pirates on privateers had a lower rate of accidents and disease than sailors in the Royal Navy. A lot of navy sailors died because they were pushed too far in training accidents."

Pirates, on the other hand, were known to sing while they worked. They had individual styles and nicknames and the ability to laugh at and with each other. And if they got to a place where they could open a keg at night, it was all right for them to get drunk as long as they could show up ready for work the next day.

"They partied a lot, maybe too much, but today's businesses could learn to lighten up occasionally," Mr. Garrow adds.

"The lesson, above all, is that success is built on respect," he concludes.

"Treat your employees as if they were volunteers, because that's in fact what they are. When they really want to be there, they will do their very best."