

**WESTERN NEWS,
The University of Western Ontario**

**VIEWPOINT
September 29, 2005**

What leaders could learn from pirates

Shiver me timbers, life for a pirate captain was rough. He was expected to get extraordinary results from a rag-tag collection of unruly, lazy and quarrelsome outlaws. The captain either got his act together or faced a long swim home.

My Althouse College summer school colleagues and I faced a similar challenge when we entered the classroom as first-time teachers more than 30 years ago.

Pirates are one of the world's oldest professions and the first to develop organizational leadership skills. They knew what business they were in. Every pirate knew what was expected of him.

In my view, their success and how they found it, is worthy of consideration by Canadians who are en route to a career in business or teaching.

There are three Timeless Leadership Principles that today's leaders and educators and a host of others, can apply.

First, get on board. Pirate captains that survived learned to generate commitment prior to sailing by having crews vote on all major decisions, such as where they would sail, the rules of conduct, how they would divide treasures found and the election of their officers.

Only with a clear agreement on each of these questions did a pirate captain have the authority to command a pirate ship.

Sounds simple enough, but would I dare ask students to vote on who their teacher would be? What if they did not choose me? What if their chosen rules of conduct were not acceptable to the Principal?

My students were in, what was then called, the 'four-year stream'. They were not university bound and were not interested in academics. But, by generating open discussions, we reached agreement on the following points:

- They did want a high school diploma, and therefore, did need a passing mark.
- They were consumers, and it was better to be a smart consumer.
- They wanted jobs when they left high school.
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These three points gave me my basis for a two-way commitment to work together.

My topics (marketing, retailing, economics, and law) were my vehicle, or pirate ship, while my ultimate objective (or treasure in pirate terms) was to prepare my students for life as consumers, employees and even business owners.

Second, stay the course. Leaders, whether on pirate ships, in the classroom or in businesses, are responsible for staying the course or working at the agreed-upon plan. At the beginning of each class, I set out to reinforce our consensus before sailing forth, much like pirates had done. Each day, I searched the Globe and Mail for relevant examples, to bring business and consumer principles to life.

And finally, share the treasures. Pirates invented the world's first incentive plan (profit sharing) by agreeing to share our treasures. Pirates learned two things about sharing treasures: the more treasures they shared, the more treasures they found and once crew members had money, they wanted more than money.

I found that by bringing topics to life, by relating what we were doing in class to their futures, I could help them to get closer to their real objectives and make school more rewarding, and increase their chances of success.

When I left teaching to go into the world of business, I found that the same approach worked with customers and colleagues everywhere. Leaders need to “Get on Board, Stay the Course” and “Share the Treasures”.

Perhaps at some point in the future, writers will supplant pirate stories with tales of teachers creating rich treasures and snug harbours through their work with students. Aye me hearties, they would be tales worth telling!

Robert Garrow attended summer school at Althouse College of Education during the summers of 1968 and 1969, obtaining a Secondary School Teaching Certificate. He taught for a number of years before moving to commercial banking and consulting. He is owner of Pirate Leadership and the author of *Ahoy Mates! Leadership Lessons from Successful Pirates*. Visit him at www.pirateleadership.com or send an email to: info@pirateleadership.com