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Setting Sail For Success

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Setting Sail For Success

By Bob Garrow, Pirate Leadership
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Pirate Captain Bob Garrow shows modern-day leaders how to generate wealth by implementing pirate principles.

Successful pirates, such as Sir Francis Drake, generated extraordinary riches while unsuccessful pirates faced a long swim home. Given a choice, we would all choose phenomenal wealth.

Unfortunately, many who choose phenomenal wealth still end up facing a long swim home. The good news is that pirates long ago found the formula for successful ventures.

Pirate's Booty

Successful pirates generated phenomenal wealth. In the 1570s and 1580s, Francis Drake captured enough Spanish gold to enrich his financial English backers (including Queen Elizabeth) and cause the bankruptcy of Spain. He captured unimaginable treasures and even had to leave other treasures behind because he could not transport them back to England. His cumulative success was phenomenal.

GET ON BOARD

Successful pirates were great business planners. Before each sailing, they held planning sessions in which they made such important decisions as:

- Where they would sail
- What their rules of conduct included
- How they would divide their treasures
- Who would be their captain and responsible for finding treasures
- Who would serve as quartermaster to see that the captain did not overstep his authority

The existence of a plan did not guarantee success, but pirates who had not committed wholeheartedly to a plan had little chance of success.

The same is true today. We have to develop—and stick to—a game plan to be successful. The unexpected happens, and we may be diverted off course by sudden storms. But the stronger our commitment to the plan, the sooner we get

back on course and continue our journey to success.

Pirates saw the planning process as involving three steps:

1. Building commitment among crew members
2. Focusing on the best opportunities
3. Developing innovative strategies and tactics

Step 1: Build Commitment

For pirates, business planning or getting on board was a decision-making process through which they built the commitment needed to bring some sense of order to the unruly, quarrelsome and sometimes lazy crews.

Like pirates, today's employees are not effective unless they are committed. Unfocused, apathetic and uncaring employees can drag down an organization. Leaders need to view employees as volunteers who want to do their best and realize they cannot successfully command best efforts from people.

The pirate practice of getting on board before sailing remains a great idea. Yet too often, managers fail to involve their staff in the planning process. People today, like the pirates of yesteryear, best implement decisions they help make.

To build commitment, the best leaders ask their colleagues to develop game plans, showing how they will contribute to the implementation of the organization's strategy and attainment of its goals. This approach strengthens the sense of ownership of—and commitment to—decisions made and may generate some new and better ideas.

World's Largest Pirate Fleet

In 1604, Captain Peter Easton called on Captain Bob Garrow at the World Professional Pirates to help develop a strategic plan for several thousand unemployed ex-Royal Navy sailors who had been discharged in Newfoundland. Pirate Captain Bob called together these unemployed men to help develop a plan. To maximize their commitment, he allowed every man to vote on all major decisions including:

- Whether to become pirates or fishermen (the only business opportunities in Newfoundland in 1604)
- Their rules of conduct
- How they would divide their treasures
- Where they would sail
- The election of the captain and quartermaster for each ship

These unemployed sailors were so committed to their own success that they became the world's largest pirate fleet: 5,000 pirates on 40 ships. It was true in the 1600s, and it is true today—people best implement decisions they help make.

Step 2: Focus On Your Best Opportunities

To pirates sailing on small wooden ships, the world's oceans were almost endless. If they chose to chase ships all over the world, the sails and riggings would rapidly wear out. They would also go far too long between captured treasures. To succeed, pirates had to focus on some promising but more limited stretches of ocean.

It was true of pirates, and it's still true today. We cannot be all things to all people. Rather, we need our business planning process to focus on what we do best and the markets we can best serve.

This involves two steps:

1. Review core skills (what you like doing, what you do best and do on a daily basis that is beneficial to your targeted customers).
2. Identify the best marketplace opportunities. Start with emerging future opportunities and threats you must consider in your decision making. Match up emerging opportunities with your core skills. Where do you see your best fits? Develop a game plan to successfully develop and serve your chosen markets while minimizing the impact of any external threats that might impact your organization.

Step 3: Innovate To Succeed

Only a small percentage of businesses make a lot of money. (The July 24, 2006, issue of Fortune magazine quotes an average annual return on capital of only three percent generated by the Fortune 500.) Most businesses fail to develop a unique product or service and do not create innovative and effective marketing strategies. By default, they fall into the little-or-no-profit trap of striving to survive in markets where their competitors have established the ground rules in their own favor.

While competition was not a big factor for pirates, battles at sea were—and they were extremely risky. Any ship could

be hit and sunk by a few lucky shots. And the risk of fire was high. Imagine yourself on a small wooden ship set afire by a lucky cannon shot—with no fire department in sight.

Successful pirates were innovators and appeared when and where least expected to capture ships without fighting. Be it battles at sea or intense competition, the solution is the same. Leaders must step forward to develop strategies and tactics to reconstruct the competitive circumstances in their own favor by building on their advantages while minimizing those of their adversaries.

Faced with such intense opponents, successful pirates would generate innovative ideas to get closer to customers and outsmart the competition, or they would sail away to find another market where they could establish themselves on a more profitable basis. They would never remain where profitability could not be achieved.

Today's leaders have similar choices. First, they can craft innovative strategies to serve customers so well that competitors are rendered less relevant. Second, they can find new and more profitable markets where competitors have not yet established themselves.

Whether the challenge is avoiding battles at sea or overcoming intense price competition, the solution can best be found through innovative thinking. In each case, you need a unique game plan by which you can best serve customers and to which opponents cannot successfully respond quickly. Having generated a head start, the best leaders continue to innovate, expanding their lead and leaving competitors continually playing catch up.

To maximize your crew's innovative thinking capacity:

- Move your business planning session off site. Rent a meeting room or borrow someone else's boardroom.
- Allow extra time for people to shift from thinking from their own position in the company and day-to-day concerns to looking at issues from a purely corporate perspective.
- Provide adequate time for discussions.
- Bring in a skilled facilitator who can energize the sessions, stimulate innovative ideas and manage discussions.
- Listen proactively to each suggestion. Strive to understand the possibilities behind each suggestion before ever rejecting an idea.
- Generate humour and comic relief to keep the energy level high and the innovative thinking flowing.

STAY THE COURSE

The last part of the business planning process is to record the decisions made to assure you will implement them. The first step is to clearly identify the following with regard to the implementation of each decision:

- What must be done
- By whom
- By when

Now that everyone is on board, the next step in implementing your plan is to ensure that your organization stays the course or works the plan, which is a key leadership responsibility. People, and therefore organizations, tend to lose focus over time. Accordingly, leaders must seek out every opportunity to promote the organization's purpose or mission, goals and strategy, and show the impact of each person's day-to-day performance on the organization's success.

Leaders must tally daily, weekly and monthly results, and compare them to targets. Otherwise, results can fall behind little by little until suddenly key objectives become unattainable.

SHARE THE TREASURES

Pirates learned two things about sharing treasures:

- The more treasures shared among crew members, the more treasures they found.
- Once people have money, they want more than money. Pirates had to find additional ways to energize their crew and reward success.

For instance, my parrot, Commitment, eats bird seeds, but she loves cashews. Therefore, when I want her to sing, I give her cashews. Leaders and managers need to spend time with their employees to help them understand what they want out of life and show them how they can best achieve such dreams by contributing to the organization's goals.

An alert leader can create non-financial treasures easily and at little or no cost to the organization. Suggestions include showing personal respect for each person's feelings, having an interest in people's opinions, recognizing contributions, involving employees in decisions affecting their work and lives, and establishing a team environment where all members participate in a successful organization with important work to do. Employees generally appreciate the same things we appreciate receiving from our own leaders and colleagues.

WRAP UP

To succeed, adopt these three timeless leadership principles:

- Get on board using your planning process to build commitment, focus on your best opportunities and develop innovative strategies to succeed.
- Stay the course and work your plan.
- Share your treasures—financial and non-financial—to continually re-energize your crew.

Apply these principles to become a great pirate captain, leading a more focused and profitable organization. **PPB**

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