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Remember the Alamo!

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July 20, 1969.

I will never forget July 20, 1969. I was visiting my grandmother, sitting in front of her black and white television, watching CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite shed a tear as Neil Armstrong placed his boot on the moon for the first time. As a young child, I had no real concept of the significance of the event; I just thought it was cool he was on the moon.

However “cool” it may have been to watch, that single event inspired an entire generation...my generation. It showed us that we could do almost anything if we worked hard enough and put our minds to it. It served as the driving force behind much of what we accomplished for the next few decades. Whenever a project or business activity reached a stumbling point or hurdle, the common phrase became “What, we can put a man on the moon, but we can’t...” It’s also what personally motivated me to excel in school and focus on math, science and electronics. In fact, as a high school kid in the late 1970s, I was developing personal computers and dabbling in robotics, both of which earned me a spot in the International Science and Engineering Fair, all because of the inspiration I received from the Apollo program and the astronauts who served as my personal rock stars. (Ok, so I was a bit of a nerd.)



Flash forward to March 5, 2010. The Des Moines Area Community College West Campus hosted its first annual Innovation Week (iWeek 2010). The theme for the week was the Apollo Moon missions, and our keynote speaker for the event was Captain Alan Bean, Apollo 12 and Skylab III astronaut and the fourth man to walk on the moon.

I chose the Apollo program as the theme for our first Innovation Week because it serves as one of (if not *the*) greatest examples of innovative thinking and problem solving in the history of mankind. Those involved in the program had a very short period of time (less than nine years) to meet the deadline given by President John F. Kennedy and presented to a joint session of congress. They had to invent over 80% of the technology required, and successful completion of the program required the participation of over 400,000 people and 10,000 organizations and companies...a massive project to say the least.

The result was the development of the Saturn V rocket...a machine that towered 363 feet, weighed about 6.7 million pounds, and had over 2 million functioning parts, all controlled by a computer with less power than what can be found in today's smart phones. The entire rocket package enabled three astronauts to travel a quarter of a million miles to the moon, a heavenly body that is in constant motion in relationship to the earth. And the entire feat was accomplished by using the power of the human mind as the Internet, the personal computer and even calculators didn't yet exist.¹

Alan Bean's speech during iWeek was inspiring as he detailed the events leading up to the successful completion of President Kennedy's vision. However, there was a repeated theme throughout his talk about the lack of knowledge and understanding required to get someone to the moon and how it required a large group of smart, but very average people working together to accomplish the mission. Since it hadn't been done before, no one knew exactly what to do, so they had to learn how to communicate effectively, solve problems as a team, manage large-scale projects, and most importantly maintain their drive and passion during failures and setbacks. To illustrate the "work-in-progress" and "learn-as-we-go" approach to the project, NASA had stated in 1962 that the Apollo launch vehicle would be a "white-and-silver shaft jutting majestically 185 feet into the still-cool morning air." This statement only underestimated the eventual design by about 200 feet.²

During our time together, I found Captain Bean to be warm, friendly, intelligent and talented, but he was also the very type of person he talked about during his speeches; an average person (just like you and me) who had to figure things out on the fly while working with other people to accomplish something beyond what had been only imagined. Whether listening to his formal iWeek presentations or just casually talking while eating a burger at lunch, Captain Bean began to get me thinking about the roles of both leaders and followers.

Where Should the Focus Be?

I don't believe that anyone today can dispute that we tend to put our leaders on pedestals and praise them for their greatness in overseeing a successful accomplishment or outcome. Whether it's Steve Jobs, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Peyton Manning, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, or George Washington, we have always admired leaders for the great outcomes that occur under their leadership. We buy the many books either written by them or about them, we complete studies to determine common characteristics they share, and business colleges and others spend countless hours analyzing them. However, after listening to Captain Bean and thinking about the larger picture of process, I think that our focus is incorrect.

I am not trying in any way to downplay the importance of strong leadership. It takes a leader to set forth vision and direction and to accept responsibility and be accountable. It takes a leader to build a team capable of getting the job done. And it takes a leader to serve as a unifying force during the entire process. Without President Kennedy's vision, we might never have gone to the moon. Even after his death, he still served as a unifying force for those working on Apollo to remain steadfast during a difficult time in this country.

However, after thinking about the process as a whole, I believe we need to refocus our emphasis. We should be spending much more time focusing on the people who get the job done: the people who do everything necessary to actually achieve the vision set forth by the leader. These people, the "followers" for lack of a better term, are those who apply their education and skills to design and build the parts, the soldiers who put their lives on the line storming the beaches of foreign countries, the players who spend six days a week training hard for a three-hour game on Sunday, and the staffers who regularly work overtime to make sure reports are submitted by deadline. In the words of Alan Bean, these are the "average people who come together to do something great."

Without the "followers" (perhaps "doers" is a better term), nothing would actually ever be accomplished. Therefore, the doers should be receiving far more of the credit and accolades for achieving the outcomes set

forth by leaders. These doers made going to moon possible, they won the battles at Omaha Beach (D-Day) and Iwo Jima during WWII, they play and win the Super Bowl, and they get the presentation finished on time for the big meeting with the prospective client. The world needs doers...lots of them...for without them, nothing happens.

Doers Can Also Inspire.

In 1836, Mexican General Santa Anna marched his army of more than 1500 soldiers against the approximately 200 Texian soldiers defending the Alamo Mission. On their third advance, Santa Anna's army overwhelmed the Texians (later known as Texans after Texas joined the Union). They were either brutally slain or executed in the process and only the noncombatants were spared to share the story of the defeat with hopes of putting the fear of the Mexican army in other Texians. However, the opposite occurred, and men flocked to join the Texian army commanded by General Sam Houston. The rallying cry of "Remember the Alamo!" became the central motivator of the revived Texian Army which went on to quickly defeat the Mexican army and secure the independence of the Republic of Texas.

Although the doers at the Alamo (the soldiers and volunteers) were outnumbered over 7 to 1 and most certainly knew they would not survive repeated attacks by the Mexican army, they demonstrated that with the right focus, a group of average people can do something extraordinary. Not only were they able to take out about a third of the Mexican army during the battles, their sacrifice at the Alamo unified and inspired what was then a fragmented and disorganized Texian army.³

What makes a good doer today?

We need many people to accept the roles of doers: we need those who are task intelligent and capable, united towards a common goal, willing to go above and beyond when needed, able to formulate and ask questions to understand and develop clarity of thought, open to necessary change, and willing to follow others. The process requires a coordinated effort on the part of doers who can effectively communicate and work as a team.

When Vince Lombardi was the coach of the Green Bay Packers, they relied heavily on a play known as the "Power Sweep." The play required players to pull out of their normal positions in order to block downfield while the running back would run to wherever the other team wasn't. It wasn't a trick play or something very glitzy, but it was a very effective play used by Lombardi that allowed the Packers to win five NFL championships. Lombardi once said, "It's my number one play because it requires all eleven men to play as one to make it succeed, and that's what 'team' means."⁴

The Power of One.

Ultimately, however, success comes down to the individual, regardless of the size of organization, group or team. It's been said that a single person can change the world, but a single person can also derail an entire process. A single player out of position can quickly cause even a simple play to fail.

Although it's the role of leaders to focus on what the big puzzle will look like, it's the role of doers to focus on putting their specific pieces in place. If all doers are maximizing their personal effectiveness, then the puzzle will successfully come together. For doers to be effective in their respective roles, they must understand the importance of "personal" leadership and its direct impact.

A quick Google search of "personal leadership" will yield hundreds of thousands of results ranging from its

definition to developing it to a wide assortment of insights related to it.

For the purpose of this piece, I define personal leadership as the proactive approach towards effectively maintaining the five areas of personal health: physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and financial.

Physical Health: Directly Impacts Energy Level

Numerous studies point to the relationship between physical health and productivity. Feeling good results in less down time, a better attitude, and more energy. There are many reasons why a growing number of companies are instituting wellness programs (with lower health care costs being not the least of them). Physical health requires some discipline and a life consisting of a controlled calorie diet and exercise (see my piece entitled, "Attack of the Killer Kirby"⁵ for additional discussion of the need for personal discipline).

Emotional Health: Affects the Quality of Both Life and Work

Numerous studies have also shown a direct relationship between physical health and emotional state (and vice versa). Stress, burnout, alcohol and drug abuse, depression and a wide variety of other mental health concerns have a direct impact on productivity and serve as distractions to effective outcomes. Engaging in positive activities and doing the things you enjoy will help you feel better about yourself and maintain a sense of balance in life.

Intellectual Health: Continues Throughout Life

Lifelong learning is a must, especially with life's rapid changes today. Reading, taking additional classes, attending workshops and seminars, watching certain programming on television, and sometimes even playing games will not only improve your intellectual core and problem-solving abilities, they can also be fun and relaxing, thereby improving both your emotional and physical health.

Spiritual Health: Creates Purpose and Virtue

Believing in something greater gives purpose and direction to life. It creates the values, principles, and virtues that form the foundation for the decisions you make and directions you take throughout life. Realizing that there's more to life than just you illuminates how your piece fits within life's big puzzle. It makes you a more effective member of your family, your team at work, and your community. For example, a thorough reading of our Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights (all written by our founding fathers) displays a strong spiritual influence and belief in God.

Financial Health: Allows Sustainable Choices

As evidenced by the relentless commercials for credit counselors and recent legal changes in order to "crack down on credit card company practices," many people today face ever-increasing debt and the physical and emotional stress which results. Those who are financially healthy know how to live within their means (thus requiring a budget) and work hard to both eliminate and stay out of debt (see my piece entitled, "Haste Makes Waste"⁶ for a related discussion of life's current, fast-paced approach).

Obviously, all of these areas are closely related and work hand-in-hand. Personal leadership is a holistic process that continually addresses all five areas of personal health simultaneously. The key to personal leadership is that it is proactive. You have to decide to be healthy. You have to take action towards having a better state of health. You have to follow through on that action. And you have to evaluate the outcomes as you go and adjust as necessary. It's all about doing something to create active change, and not just hoping for a different outcome.

Of all the words and catch-phrases thrown around today, the one I personally dislike the most is the misuse of the word "hope." Hope is not a strategy. It's not a vision or plan. It's not proactive or action-oriented. And it's definitely not about effort or actually applying yourself. People "hope" for things to improve their lives. They "hope" for positive changes, and they "hope" that things will just come their way or perhaps that others will fix their problems. In reality, I believe that hope—without an understanding of the larger effort needed—can serve as an excuse to do nothing at all, or at the very least, to avoid the discipline and persistence required to accomplish anything of real substance. If we had just "hoped" to get to the moon, it would have never happened.

I recognize that hope might be all that's possible for things outside our control. We hope that a giant meteor doesn't crash into and destroy the Earth, and we hope that cars won't cross over the centerline and hit us head on. But hope alone is often inadequate for things within our control. In this regard, hope actually can become

a paralyzing force if people simply wait on the actions of others or outside events to occur.

The people who have demonstrated great leadership over their lives and in the lives of others don't "hope," they "do." They are doers. They are the people who are willing to do their part and not simply wait on others to do theirs. They are willing to do the jobs (or tasks) that no one else really wants to do, and then do them with a positive attitude.

When I was young, my parents would repeatedly stress, "If you are going to do something, then do your best, or don't do it at all." Sometimes I wonder if we are moving towards a "I'd rather not do it at all" mode of living. Based on personal observation, if parents are still teaching this vital lesson to their children, then for some it must be going "in one ear and out the other" (something else my father used to say).

I recently had the honor of visiting the National World War II Museum in New Orleans. One thing that I took away from this moving experience, more than anything else, was the overwhelming sense of sacrifice on the part of everyone for the greater good of the country. Everyone—leaders, doers, ordinary citizens, those in combat and those who were not—helped to fight Hitler's Nazis and the Japanese Empire. Everyone played an important role, whether it was fighting in battles, working in factories, or rationing and conserving resources. People knew that if they personally came up short, it could negatively affect the entire outcome. Personal leadership and discipline were the norm.

The same was true during the Apollo program in the 1960s. It's been reported many times that early on in the program during a tour of one of NASA's facilities, John F. Kennedy asked a janitor who was sweeping the floors what he did for NASA. He replied, "I'm putting a man on the moon." Although the specifics of this story seem to vary, thus putting the factual nature of the account in question, my conversations with Alan Bean confirmed that this very essence existed within NASA during the Apollo program. He said, "Everyone knew their role and its importance towards accomplishing the goal. A group of average people were able to work together, each doing their part, to achieve something great."

Whether it's the legacy of the battle at the Alamo, the sacrifices made during World War II, or the motivated efforts of over 400,000 people in the Apollo program, history is loaded with positive examples of personal leadership and the commitment demonstrated by all necessary to accomplish shared goals. As we face growing challenges as a country, as companies, and as individuals, history needs to happen now. Hope isn't working, and personal leadership, responsibility and accountability should be placed front and center. People must recognize the importance and influence of their small piece of the larger puzzle and stop bemoaning about the inadequacies of others. If everyone does their part, regardless of the context, then every puzzle will come together in some manner. And perhaps to get there, we should all take on the new rallying cry, "Remember the Alamo!"

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