

Leadership at Sea

Lessons from the Atlantic Rally for Cruisers



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It's 4:00 a.m. Other than a spectacular blanket of stars, there's not much to see. We know other boats are near, but we feel completely alone in the middle of an unforgiving ocean. Tonight, my thoughts are on keeping a steady course, and on our quest to break the extreme sailing record for a transatlantic crossing.

Back on dry land with time to reflect, I think about those nights and what we accomplished—my crewmates and I won the Atlantic Rally for Cruisers, a race from the Canary Islands to St. Lucia, crossing the Atlantic with no motor in a little more than eight days—and I also think about leadership. I believe there are some meaningful connections.

To achieve business excellence, we need strong, aligned teams. This can be a challenge even under normal conditions in the workplace, when everyone feels safe and stress levels are relatively low. Now imagine what we can learn from sailing: 15 people living together for nine days while moving 23 knots per hour in a constantly rising and falling deck space smaller than most CEOs' offices. We work in rigid shifts—four hours of work, four hours of sleep. If just one crew member is not aligned, the boat can capsize in seconds.

And as I reflect on what we experienced in this race, I want to suggest six lessons from leadership at sea that can be applied to leadership in business. And trust is an essential element of each of them. Onboard, we are not simply asked to trust the capabilities and judgment of our teammates. We are literally putting our lives in each other's hands.

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE SEA:

1

Feed on the energy that stress creates.

What transforms 15 human beings under heavy stress into a high-performance team? Instead of focusing on the sources of stress, focus on what to do with the extra energy boost that stress gives you. And when faced with multiple options, choose the most valuable one: collaborate.

When you're turning your attention away from yourself and toward the team, the natural instinct to avoid stress will go away, giving you courage to face the source of that stress and turn it into an extremely powerful, positive energy flow.

2

Give everyone a turn to lead.

To keep the boat moving at full speed, it is essential that it is steered by team members who feel refreshed. This is not the typical regatta, where a clever helmsman can make the winning difference in a short sprint. There is no single leader—each person rotates through leading and supporting roles. The crew is divided into smaller teams that co-own the responsibility for staying on course. Each team-mate is in charge when his or her turn comes, and each person takes time to rest. If someone is struggling, others are there for assistance. But there is no room for heroes who seek to do more than their share, because they will become tired and less effective.

3

Communicate what is needed, when it's needed. Not more. Not less.

When the steering role is frequently passed from one team to the next, clear communication is key to keeping the boat on track and pursuing a coherent, consistent strategy. When taking the helm, I want to know wind stability and direction, angle of the waves, course heading and other crucial information. Don't assume I see what you see—especially because my eyes are still adjusting to the dark. This handoff must be as effective and efficient as possible, and I don't want to be distracted with other facts that aren't relevant to the immediate challenge.

4

Be mindful.

During a race, discipline is key. Dropping the mainsail requires several people going through a series of well-rehearsed steps. Shortcuts never pay off. Discipline also means being mindful at all times, and being accountable to yourself. For example, you must put on your safety gear before every shift on deck. This means 15 minutes to put it on and 15 minutes to take it off—every four hours. Those 30 minutes are competing with time to sleep and eat, and there can be a temptation to skip this step. But the team is counting on you to remain “in the moment” and stay true to a set of agreed-upon principles.

5

Anticipate risk and the consequences of your response.

At sea, you don't have control over any of the external factors around you—such as the wind or waves. The boat's speed and effectiveness depend upon being able to anticipate the consequences of all factors and make decisions accordingly. If a strong storm is approaching, shall we try to maintain our current course and outrun the storm, or change our path (and add extra miles to the trip) to avoid the weather? There is no way to trace a straight line from Las Palmas to St. Lucia—we are making new decisions every minute. We are constantly trying to find the balance between getting there safe and getting there fast, guided by our ability to anticipate what is going to happen and the impact that each potential response will have.

6

Be willing to lose sight of the shore.

When you have been at sea for a week, with the sea salt crust hardening on your skin and the destination not yet in sight, you start to wonder, “Why on earth did I do this?” Often followed by, “Is it really so important to win?” How do you prevent this from happening? By reconnecting with your own strengths and values, you reinvigorate yourself. By remembering all that you did to get ready for this challenge and how you have handled similar situations in the past, you rekindle that urge to strive for your best.



Rick Bomer at the helm of the Brunel sailboat during the Atlantic Rally for Cruisers.

“Only when we are willing to lose sight of our established habits, instincts, and social conventions can we fully trust each other and truly, deeply connect as human”

The biggest lesson that I learned from this race is that it takes courage to cross the ocean, but it takes even more courage to do it in such a tight relationship with others, in a mutual and deep sharing of physical and psychological experiences and needs. As Christopher Columbus once said, “You can never cross the ocean until you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.”

In business, we can take this beyond the literal sense of place. Only when we are willing to lose sight of our established habits, instincts and social conventions can we fully trust each other and truly, deeply connect as human beings.

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