

IMAGE TWO

[Rivers and Floods]



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Rivers and Floods

FLOODS AND RIVERS ARE BOTH BODIES OF WATER. FLOODS DAMAGE. RIVERS ARE USEFUL IN MANY WAYS. THE DIFFERENCE? FOCUS. LEADERS MUST CHANNEL PEOPLE, TIME AND MONEY TOWARD ONE FOCUSED VISION.

I have a picture indelibly etched in my memory. When I was a kid, I remember a horrifying flood sweeping through a town not far from where we lived. I watched the TV intently as reporters showed the expanding body of murky water run through streets, over yards and into houses, restaurants and stores. The rushing water seemed to demolish everything in its path. In my mind, I can still see people standing on the tops of their cars weeping, as they watched their homes collapse and float away—piece by piece.

What started as a simple rainstorm ended up filling the nearby rivers and eventually flowing unmercifully into neighborhoods and strip malls. I remember thinking: How can such a simple thing as water do such damage? Some of my friends took a while to recover from the flood. One of them, in fact, wanted nothing to do with water for over a year. For him, a large body of water without some boundary was a frightening thing.

This is a picture of an important leadership principle. Many organizations begin very focused, like a river. The leaders possess an idea they want to implement. Soon, however, in their zeal to grow, they begin expanding far beyond the boundaries of their initial vision. If they are good at making widgets, they reason, why not make other products as well? Before long, in the name of meeting needs, generating revenue, or just plain growth—they become a flood instead of a river. They lose all focus and sprawl out in every direction. Like a flood, they end up damaging things. Floods can be shallow, unrestrained, muddy and harmful.

Far too many organizations become floods. Take IBM for instance. In the beginning, when IBM focused on mainframe computers, the company made a ton of money. By the 1980s, however, IBM expanded their product line and barely broke even. In 1991, they were making more products than ever, yet, the company wound up losing \$2.8 billion. That's almost \$8 million a day!

It's interesting. This rule of leadership is counter intuitive. It works the opposite of what we might think. It seems logical that enlarging product lines would always mean greater profit. It's actually the other way around. Staying focused on your central vision and strength is the key to growth. The airline industry is a good example. "People Express" launched as an airline that focused on no frills, low cost flights. At the first taste of success, they decided to expand beyond that vision. They began to provide first class seats, food, etc. Their profits dropped. In fact, they went out of business.

In contrast, Southwest Airlines entered the industry with a clear, focused vision, similar to People Express. Yet, they stuck to their strengths, and for years they've been a rare, profitable company in the airline business. Southwest Airlines refused to diversify; they remained a river. Rivers are much more narrow than floods. They move in one direction. They are a source for both electricity and transportation. Why? Vision and focus. Leaders must own a focused vision, or the organization will spill-out in too many directions. If the leader isn't focused, the team will chase after every new idea. They will fall prey to every vendor wanting to capitalize on the success. Clear and focused vision harnesses energy. Just watch your team for a while. People lose energy when their direction in life is fuzzy. But they get energized when they catch a clear vision.

Just over fifty years ago, Walt Disney gathered his inner-circle to share his idea of building "Disneyland." It would be known as the "happiest place on earth." Walt's vision was clear and focused. As his team began to get excited about the vision, however, one of the members asked, "Who are you gonna get to build it?" Confidently, Walt responded, "I know exactly who I want to build it. Find me the man who helped put the U.S. Navy back in the Pacific after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I figure he can do it."

It didn't take long for Walt's team to identify this man. His name was Joe Fowler. Admiral Joe Fowler. Retired Admiral Joe Fowler. When Disney showed up at Fowler's door and challenged him to build a theme park, Joe laughed. "You don't understand. I'm retired. I'm through." Disney quickly realized this guy was going to require some work. Placing pictures on the wall, Walt began to storyboard. Describing in great detail the feel, look, smell, sound and even taste of the park—Joe bought in. He stepped out of retirement and oversaw Disneyland's construction.

Twenty years later, the idea of Disney World was proposed—and can you guess who was hired to supervise the project? Joe Fowler. This time he was 77 years old. When the Disney team approached him a second time, he sighed again, "You don't understand. I'm retired. I'm through." But as pictures were posted and the vision was cast for their biggest project yet, Joe couldn't help but buy in. He ditched retirement again and oversaw the building of Disney World.

The story goes on. Ten years later, EPCOT was built in Orlando. Disney once again looked to Joe Fowler to lead the construction. He was now 87 years old.

Joe repeated his objection: “You don’t understand. I’m retired. I’m through.” But Disney knew Joe was the man. His team communicated the clear, focused vision again. Joe lit up, stepped out of retirement and oversaw the project.

What a picture of the energy that accompanies clear vision. Joe’s favorite phrase, “I’m retired. I’m through,” was changed to, “You don’t have to die ‘til you want to.” Hmm. I often wonder how much energy remains bottled up in people because they never learn to focus, or they just plain fail to tap into a clear vision.

Here is the irony of this principle. My friend Mike Kendrick explained it with the following phrase: What you focus on expands. Read that sentence again. Now think about it. If I tell you to focus on finding Toyota Camrys on the road, you will notice these cars everywhere. Why? Because what you focus on expands. So, the goal of a leader is to focus, not expand. Growth is a product of focus. Clarify the vision. Focus your people, time, energy and resources. Remember this: just because you CAN do something doesn’t mean you SHOULD. Intensify. Don’t diversify.

In order to accomplish this focus, it’s important to zero in on a handful of words. In fact, maybe just one word (or concept) that becomes your own. It describes your identity and vision. Some of the best selling products on the market “own” such words. Crest toothpaste owns the word “cavities.” FedEx owns the word “overnight.” Volvo owns the words “automobile safety.” As they focus their energies on a single concept, these companies go deeper and expand in one area. They are like a river, moving in one direction. And being a river is about clear vision and a sharp focus.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

Many organizations begin very focused, like a river, but as they expand they lose their initial vision and become a flood. Using the examples that were given in this chapter, what are some of the benefits of a clear, focused vision?

Try to think of organizations—either historical or current—who lost their vision. List them below with a brief explanation of how you believe they lost their vision. What was the end result?

SELF-ASSESSMENT

The water in a river represents the people, time, energy and resources invested in your organization. So if you're going to be a river, you've got to channel your water well. Consider these questions.

How many activities are you trying to perform? How about your organization? How thin have you spread yourself? Are you more like a flood or a river?

What should you cut out of your life or trim back, in order to be more productive?

Here's the challenge. Ask yourself: What word do we own? Ask outsiders what word comes to mind when they think of your organization?

EXERCISE

Consider an organization you're involved with and discuss within your team the "word" that most clearly describes your vision. What's your focus? Do you think your customers would agree?

Just for fun, clump your group together and tie a rope around them. Lead the group outside and see if they can stay together. Do they listen to you? Does each person try to go their own direction, or do they focus on working together?

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