

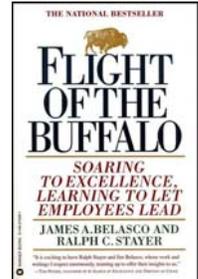
Learn From The Geese¹

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James Belasco and Ralph Stayer wrote an enjoyable little book entitled, *Flight of the Buffalo*.² They described how a simple idea changed their leadership style. They saw their organization functioning like a herd of buffalo, which are absolutely loyal in



following the lead buffalo but unable to act much on their own when something happens to the leader. They realized that what they wanted was an organization functioning more like a flock of geese, a group of responsible, independent workers collaborating as one team.



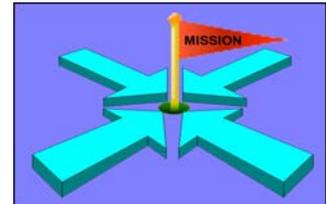
Since their book was published, numerous articles have appeared on the Internet applying their thinking to teamwork.³ I found the book and subsequent articles to be very helpful in conceptualizing the basic principles of teamwork. The ideas at the core of those publications are very thought provoking. So, I decided to share them with you.

FACT ONE:

To begin with, it's a fact that as each goose flaps its wings, it creates uplift for the bird following. By flying in a "V" formation, the whole flock adds 71 percent greater flying range than if one bird flew alone.

Lesson Learned

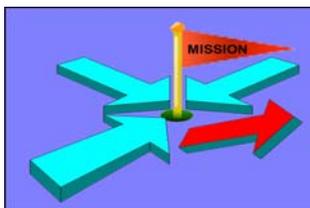
A team of people working together to achieve an organizational mission can more effectively achieve that mission than each person working on his or her own. Together, a mission-oriented team of people harnesses the power of the unique talents, knowledge, and skills of one another. It is important that every organization articulate a clear and inspiring mission statement and reinforce it with the design of supportive, efficient work processes, and translate its elements into specific behavioral commitments for each team member.



FACT TWO:

Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front.

Lesson Learned



Teams are less effective when people become unaligned to the mission by falling out of sync with other team members, making decisions and taking actions that do not support the mission. The team leader and fellow team members must be alert and help the stray team member come back onboard. Effective teams are teams of people working with an almost unspoken, coordinated energy.

¹ From: <http://arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm> —Please take a moment to look at Arnie's site: www.arniedahlke.com

² *Flight of the Buffalo* by James A, Belasco and Ralph Stayer, (New York: Warner Books), 1994

³ For example: http://www.farbankproject.com/geese_teamwork.htm

FACT THREE:

When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back into the formation and another goose flies at the point position.

Lesson Learned

At different stages of teamwork, different kinds of expertise are needed. For example, when teams, such as process improvement teams, set out to solve a problem, some phases of the process call for idea generation, other phases require structured thinking, while still others require an expertise in measurement. Exercising his or her own expertise, every team member therefore should be capable of leading the team or facilitating meetings. Teams of people are far more effective when everyone feels empowered to lead with his or her own unique expertise.



FACT FOUR:

The geese in formation honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

Lesson Learned



Well functioning teams are made up of people who encourage one another to do their best. Attitudes are positive, not judgmental. Team members are focused on solving problems and improving things, not on finger pointing and blaming. The best teams are those in which everyone focuses on and acknowledges what others do right instead of criticizing and disparaging them for what they do wrong. A climate of objectivity prevails. People value and welcome diverse viewpoints in their efforts to achieve agreed-upon goals.

FACT FIVE:

When a goose gets sick or wounded or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it is able to fly again, or dies. Then they catch up with their flock.

Lesson Learned

Like geese, team members stand by each other at all times, including difficult times. People in any organization will collaborate more effectively in the spirit of teamwork when they reach out to help one another wherever they can, especially when workloads become hectic. Organizations with a true team culture emphasize desired outcomes rather than rigid job descriptions. Everyone recognizes their interdependence in achieving the organizational mission.



These are important lessons for any organization. It's amazing how much we can learn from a flock of geese!

