

Future Lessons From Past Leaders

Lewis & Clark Corps of Discovery, first of three parts by Rhea Blanken
Association TRENDS— [Dec. 2, 2005](#)

More than 200 years ago, President Thomas Jefferson charged Merriweather Lewis and William Clark to lead a Corps of Discovery to find a water route connecting the east and west coasts of our newly expanded nation. The Corps' extraordinary exploits and discoveries have remained fixed in the American imagination ever since.

Jefferson had additional reasons for going west and designed funding messages accordingly to secure support depending upon who needed to hear what. The Corps had scientific exploration, trade relations and imperial expansion as its "supplemental" intentions. Each needed to be resourced and scheduled to guarantee its accomplishment.

The Lewis & Clark Corps of Discovery operated within an "expeditionary mindset." Every day was a probe into an unknown world. They were living and learning moment-to-moment, aware each day that life was not the same as it had been the day before.

Lesson 1: Prepare for the future from the unknown

The Corps readied for its expedition with extensive food stores, medical and military supplies, scientific equipment and even had a specially designed collapsible boat built. Lewis spent months securing the latest knowledge from the most learned scientists of our nation. However, a lot of the planning confirmed how they pictured their way west - similar to the east with slight variations. They were unconscious to their ingrained view of the world.

They started out from a known point, St. Louis, and planned to end up at a known point, the mouth of the Columbia River. The only other place on the route whose exact location was known was the vast Mandan Indian village on the Missouri River, near present day Bismarck ND. By their standards, the Missouri River, their primary route of exploration, was largely uncharted and all other places and routes along the journey's path substantially were unknown. The

Corps counted on receiving information and navigational guidance from trappers, traders and Indians along the way to guide their course and often they had to backtrack.

While Native Americans and French trappers had charted and crudely mapped these areas, their methods were not understood and the American government had never deciphered them. Consequently, it was as if they never existed. “Acceptable” mapping methods of the time had distance as the critical measure while the Indian focus was the journey’s experiences within time.

In reality, the Corps knew less about where they were going and how they would get there than when President Kennedy said America was going to the moon.

Associations use research to categorize the impact of their past initiatives. Studying this data will not necessarily provide knowledge for the future. Too often it frames the past, connotes broad significance onto existing circumstances, and extrapolates that into future possibilities.

Lesson 2: Failures light the way to success

In the end, much of what the Corps packed for the trip was inadequate. Often they had to both improvise and acquire additional equipment, clothing and food supplies. They would have starved without the charity of tribes along the route west and coming back east. Many tribes also shared their knowledge of uncharted terrain.

The Corps of Discovery failed its primary mission to discover a water route to the Pacific Ocean. Moreover, the Great Plains were too dry for traditional agriculture and there was no part of the Missouri River system that could enable the US to claim part of the Canadian prairie - another of Jefferson’s goals. The majority of the Corps’ scientific findings were not utilized for years after their return. Lewis died tragically, all the while believing he had failed. He had not.

In the fullness of time, L&C has come to be regarded as a spectacular success. They enabled one of Jefferson’s visions for America: a coast-to-coast “Empire of Liberty.” The outcomes from their expedition far exceeded expectations in many unexpected ways. It was truly a voyage into America’s future.

The essence of a contemporary expedition is to discover uncharted territory while cultivating currently occupied realms. Successful assns do this by creatively talking about the future. They intentionally build participation into every member interaction and communication. Their leaders and staffs model the future, by word and deed, before it is reality.

The expeditionary model of the Corps is designed perfectly for today's association circumstances, as it was more than 200 years ago when our nation was inventing itself.

New circumstances call for new words and for the transfer of old words to new objects. – Thomas Jefferson

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