

Future Lessons from Past Leaders: Lewis & Clark Corps of Discovery

Expectations and assumptions can kill even the best idea

Second of three parts By Rhea Blanken

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As the 200th anniversary celebration of Lewis and Clark continues, extraordinary lessons from their expedition's successes and failures still provide food for thought:

The iron frame boat – looked good on paper

The men of the Corp called Lewis's collapsible boat The Experiment, and it was. The boat design had it lightweight; easily carried by five men; and able to hold a ton of supplies. It required pieces of wood to support its shape, an outer covering made of animal skins, and pine tar as a waterproof sealant. The idea was ingenious. If only they had actually tested it.

In fact, multiple circumstances simultaneously occurred to defeat the imaginative design. For example, when they began stitching the 30-plus animal skins together to form the outer hull, their needles left holes larger than expected. Thus the outer sealing compound was more important than ever. However, since they expected pine trees to be in abundance and there were none to be found, the sealant became the biggest problem. Their fall back plan, a mixture of charcoal, beeswax and buffalo tallow, proved to be no match for their circumstances. They later learned a design for boat construction from the Indians that accounted for sparse resources.

Lesson 3: Patience in the face of the unknown

Did their expectation of having pine tar blind them to seeing their valued resource was gone? Could they have prepared a supply in advance? Did they ever question what they knew? How does your assn examine its assumptions and scrutinize its expectations?

Consider our use of research and how we question the accuracy of our insights. We don't just ask, "What do we know?" We ask, "How do we know what we know?" or "How do we know that we know what we think we know?" These are not restatements of the

same question. One evokes facts, myth, hope and conviction. The second points to the sources for them, while the last questions the accuracy or limitations of the insights.

The Corps journals - content and commentary

Today, the journals of Lewis and Clark provide a priceless glimpse into a world few of us can imagine. Theirs was a journey into undiscovered lands full of new cultural and mental landscapes. Jefferson wanted everything recorded so Lewis and Clark kept journals as did seven other corps members. They conveyed gripping tales that still come alive whenever they are read.

But immediately after the expedition concluded, they were not read. They were not available to be read. While Jefferson wanted to digest all the details, it was several years before the journals' contents and commentary were made public. Lewis never actually completed preparing his journals for publication before his death. Was synthesizing his journals into a manuscript too overwhelming? Was he trying too hard to get it right, being too careful in his presentation?

It was 1807 before any of the Corps journals were published. It was 1814 before Clark's were in print. That was five years after Lewis died and 10 years after the start of the expedition. Even then, many of the drawings representing the discovery of *new* animal and plant species did not receive proper recognition. Consequently, later explorers and expeditions rediscovered and renamed them. Odd since the Indians already had named them! Was the Journey of Discovery more committed to claiming and naming things than learning what the Indians already knew? Was the Corps less interested in learning and more focused on telling?

Lesson 4: Practicing partnership maximizes results

Since history is all perspective, many of the Corps journal entries were based on cultural and political assumptions. Nine different journalists recorded their thoughts on politics, diplomacy, women, geography, animals, military heroism, language, trade, property, curing the sick, health and plants. Observations during their journey and their choices in presenting them have been of major influence in developing our country.

Do we encourage all who might be impacted by our actions and insights to participate and communicate? What obvious (and not so obvious) ways can we exponentially multiply our knowledge? What opportunities to be influenced by others are we avoiding?

*To attain knowledge, add things every day.
To attain wisdom, remove things every day.*
Lao Tzu, Chinese philosopher

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