

Thoughts on Leadership...

Jack Kennedy's Surprise Assignment

A reader of O'Reilly's bestseller, *Killing Kennedy*, is struck by the way in which leadership can be capriciously thrust upon people. Among the eight Kennedy siblings, Joe Jr. was slated to be the mover and shaker. The skinny, frivolous playboy Jack? A writer perhaps. And when Jack was a skipper of a sinking PT boat, presented with a leadership challenge that might have daunted George Patton, his first actions were a far cry from heroic. Allowing the collision that led to PT-109's demise was on his shoulders to begin with, and when it became evident his PT boat was in peril, Jack Kennedy's responses can only be described as inept. He seemed at a loss, gobsmacked, unable to lead.

However, over the course of what would end up as a weeklong ordeal, a leader emerged. That leader used what he had in his then-limited toolbox to its fullest to save himself and his men:

- 1. a hardiness in the ocean from his years on Harvard's swim team*
- 2. a willingness to put his own life at disproportionate risk*
- 3. a stubborn and faith-based refusal to accept defeat.*

When he and his men were stranded on a small island, Jack faced such challenges as swimming out alone, in the dark, into barracuda-infested waters and walking for hours on a razor-sharp coral reef in search of passing PT boats. He returned multiple times to reassure his men waiting on the island, before venturing out to try Plan B, C, D.... It seemed endless, but after relocating his men to a more palatable and hopefully more visible island, friendly natives happened along and a rescue followed. Jack Kennedy had managed to keep all the men who survived the collision alive for that rescue.

Whatever else this man was and wasn't, that crash course in leadership transformed JFK from a man heading for relative obscurity into a man on a trajectory to President.

So, are leaders born or made?

Neither and both, of course. Even in our binary 21st century world, the magic of leadership cannot be pinned to "yes" or "no" answers. What we do know is that sometimes surprise events can coax leadership qualities to emerge from latency. "You want ME to take over this group project?" "What is MY planned path to management?" It may be your time to prepare for those questions. Whether

leadership is a gradual progression of promotions or thrust upon you suddenly, your success depends on the depth of your toolbox and your judgment in pulling out the right tool for the job.

Let's look at what we can learn from the toolbox belonging to Second Lieutenant Jack Kennedy, when stranded on an island, famished and thirsty, with a dozen men looking to him for their salvation.

Tool #1: Jack was an ace swimmer

The Chinese coach of a world champion ping pong team was asked what he did to address his athletes' weaknesses. He responded, "Nothing! I just make their strengths so strong that their weaknesses don't matter." While it's generally not advisable to ignore your managerial or technical weaknesses, the lesson here is to be sure you don't take your strengths for granted and move on, but to grow them.

Some of the men on PT-109 didn't make it to shore. Had Jack been an average swimmer, he might have made it, but because he was an expert swimmer with extraordinary stamina, he corralled his men and swam the necessary hours it took to reach shore. Jack himself was towing a wounded man by clenching his life vest strap in his teeth. Later, on one of his treks to get help, he treaded barricuda-infested waters throughout an entire night while holding a lantern above the water's surface. Finally, it was by sourcing and relocating his men to a nearby island that help was ultimately secured.

Without having this key strength of being an extraordinary swimmer, most likely, all would have been lost.

The specific skills we develop early in life often form the undergirding for our leadership growth as adults.

As a footnote, for the years that followed Jack's ordeal right through his final months in the White House, Jack Kennedy famously never stopped swimming regularly (and to the alarm of many, always in the nude!).

Tool #2: Jack was willing to take risks beyond what he expected his men to take

This may not be what we think of as a "tool", but as the best leaders learn early, it is a key tool for earning respect and garnering enthusiasm for a project or initiative. When not much is ventured, well, you know the score.

If you want to be a brilliant leader, you take carefully calculated risks and put your own neck out there for all to see. Only then does your team get the inspiration to see the job through.

You may not be required to swim alone amid barracudas who are fond of nipping at the nearest fleshy extremity, but, well, then again, it may feel an awful lot like that at times. The better the "swimmer" you are and the more tools you can add to your toolbox through [leadership training](#), the more confidently you can plunge in for the success of your team.

Tool #3: Jack Refused to accept defeat

Churchill's admonition to his British citizenry to "never, never, never give up" is famous for its simplicity and power. Perseverance in leadership ventures is tricky business, though. There is a time to persist, a time to change course and sometimes a time to default. Or as Kenny Rogers said....no, no we won't go there. You get the idea.

Leadership development is in no small measure about discerning between these three, and this is an area where [guided experience](#) is the best teacher.

As you develop a well-stocked leadership toolbox, you will be learning the powers, effective use and even the limits of those tools.

Then, there is the intestinal fortitude of a Jack Kennedy treading water through a moonless night, as he was swept farther and farther from land by a strong current. Whether it derives from stubbornness, confidence, faith or devotion to your "team's" survival, this perseverance is perhaps the most critical element of leadership. When you know you are on the right course (or you have no options because you are stranded), never, never, never give up.

How did Jack's toolbox grow?

The answers to how Jack Kennedy grew as a leader after his fateful week as a castaway are exhaustively addressed in myriad biographies.

We know that Jack Kennedy developed into an orator of the highest magnitude, but not because he was born that way. He is said to have labored over his speeches endlessly, penning in revisions up to the last moment. We know he was never one to think he had the final answers on things, but consulted and took the counsel of trusted advisors. Finally, we know, by all accounts, that whatever his questionable behaviors and whatever his mistakes, after having that life-and-death leadership role thrust upon him, he never looked back.

