

The Lewis & Clark Voyage of Discovery: *Modeling an Expeditionary Leadership Mindset*

Over 200 years ago, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark led a *Voyage of Discovery* that has been enshrined in the imagination of Americans, young and old. The Lewis & Clark Mission defined what is meant to operate from an “expeditionary leadership” mindset.

The voyagers began at St. Louis and planned to reach the Pacific at the mouth of the Columbia River (two known points). The only other place on the route whose exact location was known was the vast Mandan Indian village on the Missouri River, near the present location of Bismarck, North Dakota. The Missouri River, their primary route of exploration, was largely uncharted (at least not by American explorers)

All other places and routes were substantially unknown. The voyagers counted on receiving continuous information and navigational guidance from trappers, traders, and Indians along the way to refine their course. Often they backtracked to remain on their ordered path.

The Corp planned extensively and carried numerous provisions and equipment to deal with any eventuality. In the end, much of what they took was useless given the reality of their circumstances. They had to improvise and acquire additional equipment, clothing, food and transportation...and would have starved without the charity of native Indian tribes.

They acquired guidance and peaceful acceptance from Indian tribes along the way through a combination of trinkets, their expressions of goodwill from President Jefferson, the curiosity of the peoples they encountered, and the projection of an image of armed strength.

In the end, the *Voyage of Discovery* failed to discover its primary goal, 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 U.S. to claim part of the Canadian prairie. Meriwether Lewis died tragically and young, believing he had failed his mentor.

In the fullness of time, the Voyage of Discovery has come to be regarded as a spectacular success. Lewis & Clark enabled one of Jefferson’s abiding visions for America: a coast-to-coast “Empire of Liberty.” The derivative outcomes from the Lewis & Clark expedition far exceeded anyone’s expectations, in unexpected ways. It was a voyage into America’s future.

Lessons Learned

- ◆ Preparation prior to launch is key and flexibility after embarking and adjusting for miscalculations is critical.
- ◆ Knowing what you know is only part of the scenario—realizing others have key information you don’t even know you don’t know gives the scenario a real future.
- ◆ Foregone conclusions, assumptions and biases are rarely accounted for yet they often frame the questions we ask, the answers we give, and the directions we seek.
- ◆ Exchange of expertise and responsibilities move easily along the *Partnership Continuum*, if achievement and workability are the goal versus credit and control.



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- ◆ Practicing the future from a *safe harbor* has lessons learned for inevitable mistakes made.

Today, the expeditionary mindset is just as useful for your organization: to practice as it was over 200 years ago when our nation was discovering and inventing its future. Exploration and discovery of uncharted territory is the essence of the expeditionary leadership approach—going into an unknown future, making mistakes and learning lessons from them. To do so, you must be receptive to innovative approaches and concepts, modeling creative ways of thinking and speaking about the future. In the words of T. Jefferson (1813):

*“New circumstances call for new words, new phrases...
and for the transfer of old words to new objects.”*

Mistakes Made	Lessons Learned
Past	Past
Present	Present
Future	Future

“If you’re a leader, think about the impact of your decisions on seven generations into the future.”
Wilma Mankiller, Past Chief of the Cherokee Nation

