

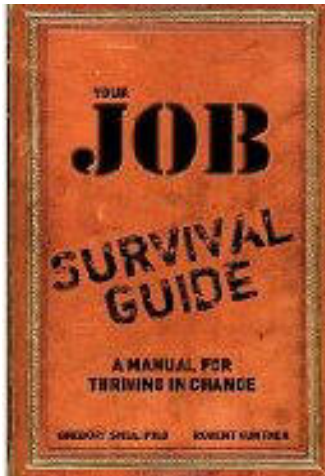
PERMANENT WHITEWATER: Fluid Leadership in Chaotic Environments



By Gregory Shea and Robert E. Gunther



In the summer of 2005, a group of a dozen kayakers on a private expedition set out to navigate 225 miles of the Colorado River as it winds through the Grand Canyon. One of the largest rapids in their course is known as “Hermit”, and the guides they met along the way warned that rocks on the riverbed had recently shifted, opening up a churning cauldron of water so ferocious it had already upended a 30-foot motor launch, the water-borne equivalent of a tour bus. Navigating the Hermit would be most difficult for the three rafts packed with supplies for the kayakers on their multi-day excursion.



The leader of the group, who had been down the river twice before, had waited 15 years for a hard-to-obtain private permit for the expedition and then invited a group of more than a dozen paddling friends from the Philadelphia Canoe Club to join him. He led the three rafts and deputized one of the most experienced paddlers to lead the kayakers. Many of the members of the expedition were trained in the basic principles of whitewater rescue but they had not trained at all in meeting the challenge that they would face that day.

Several kayakers scouted the trouble spot from the shore, while the first raft, carrying the leader of the expedition, headed downstream. A string of 15-foot waves preceded Hermit, making it impossible to see the hole precisely until the last minute. The raft descended into the heart of the beast and tipped vertical - by some miracle, it did not capsize. The two men in the boat were ejected into the churning water, however, and quickly found themselves in an eddy on the side of the river.

The raft, meanwhile, still filled with vital supplies, headed downstream without anyone on board - a ghost ship. The kayakers and two other rafts were still upstream, while the expedition’s leader was pulling himself into an eddy. At that moment, nobody was in charge. Yet within a few seconds, members of the expedition begin to organize themselves.

A kayaker on the river bank who saw the disaster blew three blasts of his whistle, the only sign of distress one can hear above the roar of rapids - but a signal with very limited information. The leader of the kayakers upstream, one of the most skilled paddlers, deputized a couple strong paddlers to take his place, jumped into his boat and paddled off in response. He paddled right through Hermit, pulled up alongside the runaway raft and steered it to the river bank. Another raft stopped to pluck the trip leader and his colleague out of the eddy. The deputized leaders of the kayakers led the group downstream. Everyone arrived safely, if wet and exhausted, at the bottom of the rapid.

Hardly your typical day at the office, but this incident does demonstrate important lessons about working and leading in the modern, turbulent environment of “permanent whitewater”. In spite of the fact that the expedition faced its greatest challenge with a disrupted leadership structure, the team was able to complete a lot of important work in a short time under harrowing conditions, on the basis of only a few orders, none of them precise.

Leadership plays a vital role in navigating permanent whitewater, but it differs from the role a leader plays in more stable environments and more hierarchical organizations. In conditions of turbulence, for example, leader and follower constantly shift and realign their working relationship. As this story shows, the leader may at times find him or herself neck deep in whitewater, unable to command, while

followers suddenly find themselves thrust into roles of responsibility. Leaders in permanent whitewater need to adjust more often, and faster, to a rapidly and continuously changing reality to ensure the success of the expedition and the safety of the team. Consequently, leading through permanent whitewater requires flexibility, humility, and, paradoxically, the willingness to follow.

Leaders in any situation have two kinds of power - positional power and personal power. Positional power comes from the leader's title and corner office; it is a ring to be kissed. Personal power, in contrast, is earned through actions and, most critically, how you treat your followers. As one product director put it, "I'm like a company of one: I have no team, no power; I share people with other projects. So I can't tell people what to do - but I can convince them by appealing to their agenda."¹ Whitewater makes personal power far more important because positions change so rapidly. What does it matter that you are the leader of the expedition if you are in the water? And if you have not cultivated strong skills and the potential for leadership among your followers, what will happen to the team when they are in charge?

Leaders need to build up strong team members who can lead when necessary. One of the keys to Ernest Shackleton's dramatic self rescue on the Endurance expedition was Frank Wild, his second in command. Many managers think "follower" is a bad word. As one CFO in one of Greg's classes put it, "We are not sheep." That's particularly true in whitewater, which requires every individual to think for his or herself; it's no place for sheep. If a captain goes overboard, you need people who can step in. Frank Wild was this type of person. He was a skilled, dedicated and dependable follower of Shackleton. But when Shackleton took a handful of expedition members off for months in search of rescue, he left most of the party on Elephant Island in Wild's hands. Wild led them through months of isolated, cold, and hungry waiting and survival in harsh conditions. No "sheep" could have pulled off such a feat.

Leaders and team members have to master the art of drawing together ad hoc teams. In kayaking, for example, teams come together for a single run down the river and then may regroup for the next one. The most important step, then, may be selecting the right people for the expedition in the first place. When Shackleton reviewed applications for his expedition, he separated them into three stacks: mad, hopeless, and possible. He then met with the "possible", who experienced his intense, unique, and easily off-putting interviews, in which he looked for hardiness and optimism. Shackleton knew that as much as any specific skills, hardiness and optimism were essential for teams to meet the challenges ahead. Once on the open sea, and later bound in ice, this team formed and reformed in multiple small groups with shifting leadership, yet each time the small groups cohered as the larger group had done.

On an ocean liner, the captain relays orders down the chain of command. On a whitewater river, followers may not be able to see or hear the leader. They may need to step into the breach themselves. Leaders need to think about how turbulent, permanent whitewater environments change the demands of leadership. They need to build new skills for leading from personal power rather than position, building trust quickly, finding strong seconds and followers, and building ad hoc teams. They need the kind of balance between the drive for success and personal humility that Jim Collins describes as "Level 5 leadership". You need to lead with the knowledge that one minute you might be proudly captaining the expedition and the next you could be up to your neck in whitewater, fighting for air. Have you built a team that will prove up to the challenge of your raft flipping - for their sake and for yours?

Authors' Notes: Gregory Shea, PhD, and Robert Gunther are the authors of *Your Job Survival Guide: A Manual for Thriving in Change*, FT Press, 2009. Source: http://leadership.wharton.upenn.edu/digest/10-08.shtml#PERMANENT_WHITEWATER: Fluid Leadership in Chaotic Environments

¹ Goleman, Boyatzis, McKee – "Primal leadership", p.52.