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A “Message to Garcia” and Modern Leadership

— Tiffany Danko, Commander, U.S. Coast Guard Reserve, Boston, MA

The 1899 publication describing the *Message to Garcia* leadership parable has often been held as a model of followership in organizations and the military. However, it also serves as a model of leadership for empowerment and recognizing the expertise of organization members. Elements of Kouzes and Posner’s (1987) five-factor transformational leadership model such as *enabling others to act* and *encourage the heart* are the foundation of modern leadership, and can enlighten our understanding of the *Message to Garcia* as leaders to seeking to build successful organizations with a responsible, empowered workforce.

“Message to Garcia”: A Teaching Tool for Followership

As a young military officer, newly-arrived at my second assignment, I met with my department head about tasks my division needed to accomplish. After I had already asked several questions, he ended the meeting by telling me, “Take the message to Garcia!” I had never heard this saying before, and quickly discovered a leadership parable often used in parts of the military. After my department head finished laughing at my clear confusion, he explained to me the military’s saying of “Take the message to Garcia,” saying that I should stop asking questions and go about accomplishing the task I was assigned.

The *Message to Garcia* story is used by some as a parable of followership, an example of not asking questions but rather going out and executing a task or mission independently, without the need for further supervision. This was the point my department head was making. This story, however, is a valuable paradigm for leadership as well. As I’ll explain, it can be a model for selecting appropriate personnel with the correct skill set and empowering them to work independently to be the powerful professionals that we value in organizations today.

What was the “Message to Garcia”?

A *Message to Garcia*, written by Elbert Hubbard, was published in 1899, and purports to tell the story of how U.S. Army First Lieutenant Andrew Summers Rowan carried a message from President McKinley to the Cuban General Garcia during the Spanish-American War (Hubbard, 1899). In his widely-circulated article, Hubbard calls out Rowan’s actions as the perfection of followership, saying that “Rowan took the letter and did not ask, ‘Where is he at?’” (Hubbard, 1899, p. 1). Hubbard describes Rowan’s actions as the exemplar of the perfect follower, saying that he carried his message to Garcia, without asking questions, without needing help, and on his own. He notes that “And the man who, when given a letter for Garcia, quietly takes the missive, without asking any idiotic questions...” (p. 2) is the best kind of worker, and will be valued and held up as the model for others, that the “...world cries out for such; he is needed, and needed badly — the man who can carry a message to Garcia” (p. 2). The real story, however, shows a different side of Rowan.

First Lieutenant Rowan was not merely a junior officer, but rather an experienced adventurer, skilled at intelligence work and demanding missions through arduous terrain, experienced in Central America and Cuba, and fluent in Spanish. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at

West Point, he served at various Army forts across the American west for several years. Then, he covertly surveyed routes of the Canadian Pacific Railroad for the U.S. War Department, followed by two years surveying for the International Railway Commission in Central America. As an experienced intelligence officer, professionally skilled in mapmaking and surveying, he became the senior figure within the mapping section of the Military Intelligence Division (U.S. Army, n.d.). Along the way, Rowan also co-wrote the book, *The Island of Cuba: A Descriptive and Historical Account of the "Great Antilla"* (Rowan, 1929) and served as the military attaché to Chile in 1897 (Conroy, 2016). Clearly, Rowan was a professional equipped with language skills and a knowledge of Cuba as well as a veteran of arduous travel, familiar with intelligence work. When called by Colonel Wagner, head of Military Intelligence, to take President McKinley's message to Garcia (Rowan, 1929), Rowan may have been one of the best choices possible for leadership in the United States military.

Leadership and Organizations

First Lieutenant Rowan was clearly an outstanding choice to take that message to Garcia but not for the reasons Hubbard elucidated — his followership, his willingness to merely say “yes, sir!” and proceed without question. Rather, he was the right choice and was consequently empowered to carry out his tasks. Traditional heroic leadership models in organizational structures focus on hierarchies, often with transactional engagements between leaders and the led, while contemporary leadership theory includes collaborative relationships, empowerment of subordinates, non-hierarchical relationships, and an understanding of the internal and external environments of organizations (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Critical to mission accomplishment and organizations, leaders and leadership have been studied by many. For example, Weber's studies of leadership and authority identified the importance of leaders and the some of the difficulties faced by complex organizations (Heilbrunn, 1994). In these studies, traditional leadership and organizational culture theories often focused on the *great man* concept of leadership, founded on charisma, skills, and innate leadership capabilities — not reliant on the skills and capabilities of subordinates or the larger organization (Raelin, 2011).

Five Factors of Leadership

Today's organizational leadership theories, however, consider many more factors such as contingencies of the environment, the interaction of members and the organization, collaborative practices, and empowerment of self-actualized workers with recognized expertise (Raelin, 2016). Although there are many organizational and leadership models, Kouzes and Posner's (1987) five-factor transformational leadership model shares many common factors with the current theories, and parallels the real lessons of the *Message to Garcia*. Their studies of organizations identified five different factors for leadership success in organizations: *challenge the process*, *inspire a shared vision*, *model the way*, *enable others to act*, and *encourage the heart*. *Challenging the process* recognizes new ideas and is a fundamental part of transforming organizations, seeking new opportunities as a leader while adapting to the changing environment. By *inspiring a shared vision*, those changes become reality for the members of the organization, as transformational leaders not only create the vision of the future but also collaboratively share that vision. Transformational leaders also *model the way*, setting and following high standards while fostering credibility, as they *encourage the heart*, serving the human dimension of the organization through motivation and recognition of achievements (Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Abu-Tineh, Khasawneh, & Omary, 2009). Focusing on *enable others to act* and *encourage the heart*, the *Message to Garcia*

story shows us the other side of the leadership model: not the followership proclaimed by Hubbard, but our responsibilities as leaders.

The real story of the message to Garcia as a model of leadership reflects Kouzes and Posner's *enabling others to act*, the collaborative and empowering recognition of organization members' skills and expertise while developing others for the overall success of an organization and its responsibilities. *Enabling others to act* also means giving organization members a voice in decision-making and the organizational planning process, recognizing the ownership and responsibility of the collaborative group within that entity (Abu-Tineh, Khasawneh, & Omary, 2009). Just as Rowan was recognized by Colonel Wagner as the best choice for the Cuban mission, as leaders, it is our responsibility to recognize the unique skills of organization members and empower them to act.

Leaders are often responsible for assigning responsibility of critical projects to individuals and groups within organizations. While perhaps not as arduous as Rowan's multi-week journey to meet with General Garcia in Cuba (Rowan, 1929), the tasks we assign are nonetheless essential to our organizations and their success. Finding the experts, like Rowan, includes looking beyond the normal hierarchy and using the unique expertise that our people bring to the organization. For example, as the Commanding Officer of a deployed Coast Guard unit, I sought to quantify the data of over 10 years of Coast Guard maritime security operations for the organization. This task not only required the technical skills of analyzing the data, but also the research expertise of finding and sifting the data out of 10 years' worth of reports of varying quality and quantity, the format of which had changed with each successive deployed unit. When I asked my department heads to find me the best person for the job, they informed me that the ideal person was not an administrative specialist, but rather one of my enlisted personnel who normally managed communications. He was the perfect person for the job, with exactly the right skills due to his degree in data analysis. What might have taken months if I simply tasked an individual was instead accomplished in a few weeks. Moreover, his analysis was outstanding and enabled us to quantify how operational requirements had grown and plan for future capital improvements, asset allocation, and personnel requirements.

Kouzes & Posner's (1987) *enabling others to act* means recognizing skills wherever they are in an organization, and empowering the members of the organization be part of the problem-solving process. In this case, I found the needed expert by being open to the initiative and professional skills shown by one of my unit members, and the wisdom of my department heads for knowing who was the right person for the job. The other side of this responsibility is not only recognizing the expertise of all members of our organizations, but also according them the latitude and responsibility to act on their knowledge and skills.

We have all found ourselves as leaders debating the degree of control we should exercise over an organizational task. Remember the real story behind the *Message to Garcia*, I have kept the leadership paradigms described in mind many times, and have been rewarded by the outstanding performance those I was privileged to serve with. For example, during my time as a senior officer at a Coast Guard Sector, the multi-year period for granting credit for prior Incident Command System (ICS) qualifications for managing large-scale multi-agency disaster and emergency responses was ending. After the deadline, any previous experience without extensive documentation would no longer be applied, and of our personnel would have to start from scratch on their qualification requirements. To address the issue, I tasked my Planning Department Head with solving the problem – determining who among our over

250 Reserve personnel met the requirements and qualified for a certification. He was the right person for the job, with the contingency planning and human resources expertise to understand and solve the problem, and I empowered him to execute the task, recognizing those professional skills. He not only developed a team to contact personnel, sweep records, and track prior performance, but the process model he created was then leveraged by the larger regional organization to do the same for over 900 personnel. As a result, our organization certified over 100 ICS qualifications before the deadline, ensuring that our people were recognized for past emergency management performance and skills and greatly enhancing the region's response capability certifications.

The *Message to Garcia* story tells us of how LT Rowan traversed Cuba, using all his resources to deliver the message. *Enable others to act* means giving others the resources to execute their mission, and granting the self-efficacy to do so. Rowan's tasking by Colonel Wagner included "You have been selected by President McKinley to carry a message to Garcia. He is somewhere in the eastern part of Cuba. Your duty will be to find him and learn the military situation in Cuba in so far as he knows" (Rowan, 1929, p. 1). He was provided with a scheduled boat as far as Jamaica, the only useful resources the War Department had for the mission, and made responsible for his own success. By contacting others, seeking out help, and using his own skills, Rowan evaded Spanish ships and patrols, reaching General Garcia in Cuba. Many studies have shown that self-efficacy and autonomy provides organization members with self-determination, responsibility, and engagement with organization missions (Hartog & Belschak, 2012). As leaders, *enabling others to act* is the means to this autonomy.

Kouzes and Posner's five factors of leadership also include *encourage the heart*, the essential feedback to organization members that acknowledges achievements, providing the human dimension of support and recognition of valuable contributions. Rowan was recognized upon his return, lauded in the papers of the time. President McKinley personally met with him, saying "You have performed a very great deed" (Rowan, 1929, p. 2). He was also awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, and went on to serve in many other high-profile roles in the U.S. Army before his retirement. While every achievement is not comparable to Rowan's, the principle of *encourage the heart* remains the same.

Our organizations give us many means to recognize success. From the most basic personal recognition, to awards, evaluations, and promotions, these are critical tools in the feedback loop of empowerment and organizational success. As a Commanding Officer, one of the most rewarding things I had the opportunity to do was recognize the outstanding performance of my unit members. Congratulating my personnel on their promotions, pointing out that the command had advanced over 25% of the unit every year, was a means of recognizing their success in our organizational mission as well as their personal success and professional growth. This feedback process is an essential part of the leadership continuum, building the social capital of an organization by recognizing members who achieve the goals and values of our organizations, contributing to its success. Kouzes and Posner's 1995 study that revealed significantly higher performance by workers who received encouragement and recognition for performance is just one example of the many studies that have indicated the need to build social capital while establishing standards and expectations (al-Baradie, 2014). Just as Rowan was recognized for his efforts in Cuba, and my command sought to commend our outstanding performers, it is our obligation as leaders to take the extra time to do so, establishing the personal connection fundamental to *encourage the heart* and build our organizations.

Conclusion

When President McKinley asked, “Where can I find a man who will carry a message to Garcia?” – the answer was, “There is a young lieutenant named Rowan here in Washington who will take it” (Rowan, 1929, p. 1). This event is often used as a model of followership, as in Hubbard’s widely-circulated article calling for the man who will “...carry the message to Garcia” (Hubbard, 1899, p. 3) without questions, without assistance, and without fail. However, it also offers the opportunity to examine the other side of leadership, including some of the five factors researched by Kouzes and Posner (1987), such as *enable others to act* and *encourage the heart*.

The *Message to Garcia* tale is not simply a lesson in followership, but rather an example of leaders selecting those with the best skills and knowledge for a task, providing them with means and responsibility to accomplish a mission, and acknowledging their successes for the benefit of the entire organization. Leadership is a definable set of skills and practices, behaviors that contribute to action for an individual and organization (Kouzes & Posner, 2013). Engagement, action, empowerment, and other elements are essential to today’s organizations, and Rowan’s actions remain relevant as a modern leadership parable. Not for followers, but for leaders seeking to build successful organizations with strong social dimensions with a responsible, empowered workforce.

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About the Author



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