

ENLIGHTENED LEADERSHIP

Monthly



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LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM RIDING THE PADDLE BOARD

Julie Winkle Giulioni



During our recent family vacation, I greeted the dawn most days from my stand-up paddle board. Around 7AM, the sea was relatively quiet, the boaters were still asleep, and I could spend an uninterrupted hour or more – just me and my thoughts.

If you're not familiar with it, stand-up paddle (SUP) boarding is one of the fastest growing sports around. The Outdoor Industry Association reports that 1.24 million people SUPed last year, up 18% from 2010. And I know why. What's not to love about an opportunity to be out in nature, on the water, doing low impact, full body exercise that offers the chance to clear one's mind and truly relax?

And the added benefit (given what I do for a living) is that stand-up paddle boarding also offers a treasure trove of leadership lessons! So, here's what I learned during my summer vacation.

Lesson 1: Take the big swells head on

How often do leaders try to avoid or skirt problems, only to get sideswiped and increase their collateral damage? While paddle boarding, you learn to point the board directly into the most intimidating part of the wave and paddle with conviction. Very shortly, you find yourself still upright and on the other side of it all.

Lesson 2: Keep your sights on what's not moving to remain balanced

Stable, steady leaders maintain their balance by keeping their eyes on what they can count on to stay unchanged: vision, mission, and values. Especially when things get rocky, a steady focus allows individuals and organizations to continue to move forward.

Lesson 3: Don't anticipate what's not yet upon you

How many times did I ruin my 'aloha' by dreading what looked like a big wave heading my way? How many times do leaders immobilize themselves and their staffs because of what might happen tomorrow? How would we all behave differently if we understood that the tsunami on the horizon is frequently nothing more a gentle roll by the time it finally gets to you?

Lesson 4: The water is soft and failure is rarely fatal

Despite the intensity of the sensations in those moments leading up to the fall, it's only water. You get wet, climb back on, and start again. Yet in business, leaders too often feel as though they're operating under life and death conditions. Mistakes fuel progress. Failure supports innovation and improvement. And what's a huge, big deal today is generally just a small splash tomorrow. So, just fall, take a moment to cool off, and know that the board is floating there ready for you to hop back on.

Lesson 5: Don't stop moving

When the seas are roughest, the natural instinct is to take your paddle out of the water and stand still. This is the quickest way to take a swim – yet leaders do this all the time. They back off on initiatives; they suspend trials; they curtail progress. Wild conditions are the time when paddling firmly with intention can establish momentum and create a welcome sense of stability during the turbulence.

Lesson 6: The rocking of others doesn't reflect how the ocean will treat you

Leaders look at market conditions and competitor performance to anticipate how they'll perform. But on the paddle board, your height, weight, the way you stand, and a number of aerodynamic concepts (that I can't begin to understand or explain) allow you to create your own unique 'balance proposition' not unlike an organization's value proposition. It's tempting to calibrate yourself against others...and take action based upon how they're moving. But they aren't you. And you can compromise the ride by forgetting that.

Lesson 7: Be grateful for the gift of a gentle wake

The ride can become far more challenging as the day wears on and more boaters and jet skiers begin kicking up a wake. Sometimes it's exhilarating; sometimes it's overwhelming. Focus on this and you'll fail to notice the courteous folks who slow down, yield the right of way, and make things easier. Leaders who recognize others who contribute to smooth sailing and leave a gentle wake are the ones who build a whole flotilla of support. There's wisdom on those waves... just waiting to wash over you!

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