



Zen Leadership in Turbulent Times by Joel DiGirolamo

The latter half of the 20th century was characterized by steady growth punctuated by an energy crisis and a few recessions here and there. As the century wrapped to a close in the late 1990s, the dot com industry built to a roaring crescendo, only to come crashing down in March of 2000. And then a few terrorists flew airplanes into the World Trade Center in New York city a year and a half later. The world hasn't been the same since.

Although our latest recession ended numerically in June of 2009, the malaise of unemployment, a sluggish housing market, continued terrorist activities, war, and low overall consumer demands continues to plague the global economy. Despite the fact that the current situation is no different from global experiences over the past 2,000 years, I believe we felt we had transcended such vagaries of the human condition. Unfortunately we have not, and continue to muddle through our personal and professional lives, making the best of every situation.

I'd like to talk about how each of you can achieve moments of stillness amidst the chaos and describe what I consider the fundamental elements of leadership. This is what I call Zen Leadership.

You Are a Leader

People frequently tell me, "I'm not really a leader. I just do my job." I maintain that

virtually everyone is a leader in one way or another. You may lead your life, you may be a parent, or a role model to someone else's child. Perhaps you act as a sounding board for fellow workers or your friends. These are all ways in which you lead.

Zen Leadership

I'd like you to pause for a moment and ask yourself, if you could choose only one word to describe leadership, what would it be? Keep this word in mind as you continue to read about Zen leadership and as we follow the journey of an outstanding leader from the early 20th century.

When you hear the word Zen, what do you think of? Zen is system that is used to bring an individual to a place of quiet, to a place of stillness. Zen is about contemplation. It is about minimalism, about stripping away everything that isn't necessary.

I'd like you to relax for a moment while we take an inward journey into a leadership experience of your own. In this moment, on a scale of one to ten, where a ten would be a perfect, outstanding leader, a five is an acceptable leader, and a one is a very poor leader, how would you rate your overall ability to lead? Write it down or make a mental note of the number.

Now as you're sitting in your chair reading this, think back to a moment when



you were either leading a group or were working for a leader and you felt the group being very creative or productive and that the work just flowed. If you can't think of a moment in which this happened, I'd like for you to imagine such a moment when you might be leading a group or guiding an individual that has a similar Zen flow to it. The moment seems effortless. The work and creativity are flowing. Capture this experience in one instant in time. Freeze it.

Feel yourself in your chair. Notice your breath. Now go to that moment of excellent leadership. Freeze it in time. See a snapshot image of it. Hear the voices and any other sounds associated with it. Feel any emotion you may have. Feel any body sensation you may have. What thought do you have in that moment?

Feel the stillness in that moment. This is a Zen moment. This is a point of stillness. Now, while continuing to deeply experience this moment in time take the index finger of your dominant hand and lightly touch a point on your other hand or on a finger of your other hand. Continue to experience that instant in time. Release the touch.

You've just created what is called an anchor. This is a technique from NLP, or Neuro-Linguistic Programming. You've anchored that moment in time.

Now I'd like to continue on about leadership and then come back to that moment of leadership you just experienced, that moment of stillness at points along this article.

Ernest Shackleton

Next, I'd like for us to follow the journey of Ernest Shackleton, an exceptional leader. Ernest Shackleton led the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914, whose goal was to be the first expedition to cross the Antarctic Continent.

Shackleton was not a stranger to polar expeditions. From 1901 to 1904 he served as Third Officer on Robert Scott's expedition to the South Pole, but was sent home for health reasons. In 1907 he returned to lead the Nimrod Expedition for another attempt at the South Pole. While this expedition ended in failure, he did achieve the most southern march up to that point. Sadly for Shackleton, Roald Amundsen and his team were the first to reach the the South Pole, on December 14, 1911.

Looking for his next adventure, Shackleton set his sights to be the first to cross the Antarctic continent. After years of fund-raising, planning, hiring personnel, and provisioning the expedition, on August 1, 1914, Shackleton and his crew of 27 men cast off from London. The Scandinavian sailing ship *Endurance* had been purchased and fit out with tons of provisions and several dog teams. An additional ship had been deployed to cache supplies from the other side of the Antarctic continent so that they would only need to start with about two thirds of the supplies they needed for the entire cross-continent trek.

No sooner than had they reached the south of England, World War I broke out and England had declared its position.



Torn between staying to serve the crown of England and continuing his adventure, Shackleton put the question to his men. It was unanimous, all agreed that if the King desired for them to stay and fight for their country, they would do so. Shackleton telegraphed the King and received a prompt reply—continue on your journey. And so the *Endurance* took a shake-down cruise to Buenos Aires, Argentina, loaded final provisions and made their way to the whaling station on South Georgia Island, a mere 850 miles from the Antarctic Circle.

Ernest Shackleton was quite a colorful fellow. As you would expect from an adventurer, he was considered energetic, imaginative, flamboyant, even romantic, with a thirst for adventure. A similarity to the swashbuckling, self-reliant Errol Flynn comes to mind for me. A particularly helpful leadership trait was the manner in which he held trouble-makers close by. This trick kept their meddlesome ways at bay. Some described him as "...the greatest leader that ever came on God's earth, bar none." and "For scientific leadership give me Scott; for swift and efficient travel, Amundsen; but when you are in a hopeless situation, when there seems no way out, get down on your knees and pray for Shackleton." As you think what a great leader Shackleton is, touch that point on your hand once again.

Fully loaded, the *Endurance* finally departs from South Georgia, enters the Weddell Sea, and heads for the coast of Antarctica. Shackleton's singular goal was for the expedition to make their way safely across the continent. As they travel the ice in

the Weddell Sea becomes thicker and thicker each and every day. Their progress slows until it stops completely on January 24, 1915 when they are stuck in pack ice. The men continually chip away at the ice to create a passageway out, to no avail. The ice has *Endurance* tight within its clutches.

And so Shackleton and his men are at the mercy of the Weddell Sea ice pack. The ice is flowing very slowly in a clockwise direction and they continue to chart their progress and look for land. Their resignation hangs like a shroud as the months wear on and on. A winter of darkness descends. Shackleton encourages the men to entertain themselves in the warmth and safety of their ship and requires practice drills and exercise out on the ice each day.

The *Endurance* creaks and groans like an old lady, the ice beginning to crush the hull. Despite her robust construction, Shackleton and the men begin to wonder if she will be able to maintain her integrity long enough to see them to safety. The *Endurance* rises higher under pressure from the ice and her hull begins to crumble. On October 27, 1915, Shackleton gives the order the men had dreaded—abandon ship. And so many of the provisions for the cross-continent trek were offloaded and deployed on the ice a safe distance from the ship.

It was around this point that Shackleton's focus shifted from completion of their cross-continent journey to another one—get all of the men home safely. This goal will consume their entire existence if they hope to stay alive long enough to make their way



back to civilization. Think of the challenges with which Shackleton is faced: a mutiny, splitting into factions, stealing food, staying healthy, and more. Again the months drone on. Summer comes and goes.

As the water warms, however, the ice begins to break up and large cracks spontaneously open and close. Shackleton realizes that a moment will arise that they may be able to safely launch their boats with enough gear to sustain themselves and make their way to land. He continues to keep the men healthy and ready to depart at a moment's notice.

A particularly difficult challenge arises when food stores begin to run low and the need for the sled dogs declines with each additional crack in the ice. A rumor begins to circulate that the dogs will be put down. The men had nurtured these dogs for over a year on the ship and on the ice. A mutiny practically ensues, but Shackleton is able to swiftly dispatch the animals without incident.

One day land is finally sighted and the men prepare for departure with renewed enthusiasm. Larger and larger cracks appear in the ice and moments hang in suspense when equipment and men are dropped into the ocean as the ice disappears under their feet. Taking to the boats is a risky proposition. Once in the water these twenty foot craft can be crushed between ice floes like a gnat between your palms.

Shackleton has the men on heightened alert, poised to enter the water. Continually assessing the ice and water, on April 9, 1916 Shackleton gives the command to launch the

boats. After five harrowing days in the Weddell Sea dodging icebergs, fighting frostbite and fatigue, the group arrives on Elephant Island, all three boats intact and everyone aboard in reasonably good health. Once again Shackleton has led his men to safety. Touch that point on your hand again and remember Shackleton's phenomenal leadership skill.

While the men are relatively safe on this inhospitable barren island, chances that anyone would find them there are effectively nonexistent. Shackleton must continue his singular focus to return the men home safely. Against all odds they have made it this far.

Shackleton and his seasoned sailors confer and arrive a unanimous conclusion—they must brave one of the worst stretches of ocean in the world, the Furious Fifties, in order to return to the South Georgia Island whaling station. This is their only hope of long term survival.

And so they prepare for the 800 mile journey of 40 and 50 foot waves, with icebergs and sub-freezing temperatures. Pinpoint navigation is required to hit the small island in the vast sea, yet they are down to one sextant and a navigation book whose water-soaked pages are slowly disintegrating. The 20 foot James Caird is rigged with a skirt to deflect water, an additional mast and sail, and rocks in the bottom of the hull for ballast.

Ten days after arriving at Elephant Island six brave men cast off in the Caird, their lot cast with the sea. Fighting hunger, dehydration, fatigue, frostbite, icebergs, and gale-force winds the men persevere in their attempt to survive and make landfall 800 miles



away. The journey was a test for Shackleton. It required all his resources to keep the crew together and focused on completing their journey. Rationing food was one of his toughest duties. Meanwhile, the men left behind realize that their lives are in the hands of Shackleton and his small brave crew.

Miraculously, Shackleton and company sight the island. After several near catastrophes as tumultuous waves hurled their boat toward the rocks they make landfall on the south side. With the whaling station on the north side of the island they must decide to venture back into their boat to sail around the island or take the overland route up to the snowy peak and down the north side.

After resting for several days and filling their bodies with freshly caught meat, they choose the treacherous climb. At 3:00 a.m. they depart and arrive in the whaling station at 4:00 p.m. the next day. Shackleton is not recognized. He was given up for dead. And so, once again, Shackleton's leadership has pulled his team through. Touch that point on your hand one more time.

Now Shackleton must turn his attention to yet another goal, procuring a sufficiently seaworthy ship to rescue the remaining men... and winter is closing in. After four attempts, one from South Georgia, three from Argentina... the men are finally rescued—every single one of them. Not one man was lost.

Over two years, Shackleton completes what I view as one of the most outstanding examples of leadership. At first he was deeply committed to his expedition to cross the Antarctic, but as he gave up hope of fulfilling

that goal he was forced to refocus his efforts on getting everyone back alive. Once he reached South Georgia Island he had a third goal, rescuing the stranded men.

My view is that, in true Zen fashion, in each instance he had a singular focus. All decisions and all behavior were through that lens.

Focus

Now lets turn back to the word you chose for leadership. Many lists of leadership characteristics have been created, but for me, leadership can be distilled down to one word—focus. Focus on the vision, focus on the goals and all else falls away.

After reviewing a significant amount of the leadership research I have created a model I use for leadership development. I feel that leadership can be distilled down to five basic elements:

- Select superior team members
- Motivate your team members well
- Ensure that your goals and vision are in alignment with your organization's goals and vision
- Maintain high job satisfaction so that you do not have team members drop out
- Most importantly—maintain a focus on the team goals and vision

Let's look at some examples. Suppose Fred comes into your office and complains that Barney isn't pulling his weight. You listen and take in his concern. Your first response might be to thank him for voicing his concern. Remember that people often just want to be heard. The small task of listening by itself may



be enough to calm a person down.

That's not enough for us, though. Reflect the concern back to Fred, making sure that you understand the nature of his complaint. Once you understand his concern determine how you can guide the conversation back to the goals and vision of your project. Emphasize how Fred's role in the project is important to its completion and your role is to work with everyone, including Fred and Barney. You will work with Barney to determine if a problem exists, and if so aid to correct it.

What would you do if Sally began to disrupt a meeting, causing the conversation to veer off the task at hand? You could gently ask how the line of discussion is helping to meet the goals.

Imagine that your manager enters your office and informs you that you must lay off three of your ten team members. You didn't see this coming and had not planned for it emotionally or logistically. First come back to the point of stillness. Touch the point on your hand or finger to take you back. Next, review the vision and goals for your project. Are they still feasible with seven people? If they are, decide what changes need to be made in the remaining group and move forward. If not, involve the team in resetting a new vision and goals, and of course you may need to renegotiate your new project scope with your superiors.

Choices

If you were able to list all of the large and small things affecting your life each and every day,

you could put them into two buckets: those things you can't control and those things you get to choose. We certainly have no control over the sun and weather, but we do get to choose where we live. We choose to come to our job every day but we can't control what our managers, co-workers, or customers will say or do.

So remember that even in times of stress and chaos we have many choices every single moment of our daily lives. You have the freedom and opportunity to make choices. When necessary, come back to that point of stillness and determine what choices you have.

Some of the choices may be as small as choosing whether the toilet paper rolls off the front or back, and some may have profound implications such as choosing to fund a given project.

Lessons from Evolutionary Psychology

If you examine the behavior of primitive tribes you will find that those with adequate food supplies are either leaderless or form a loose association with a figurehead leader. Similarly, in good times employees feel micro-managed when strong leaders exert control. Workers feel that they know what they are supposed to do and don't enjoy additional constraints, as they view it.

In tribes where food is scarce or physical threats are present, strong leadership is desired as individuals look for someone to show a path forward, out of the crisis. We are no different today. In times of crises we look for a strong leader to show us the way out.



Let's look at a few examples. On September 11, 2001 a group of terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center in New York city and the Pentagon. Rudy Giuliani, Mayor of New York city, whose career and personal life was in a tailspin stepped up to the microphone and said, in effect, I'm in charge.

He rallied the city and proclaimed, "Tomorrow New York is going to be here. And we're going to rebuild, and we're going to be stronger than we were before... I want the people of New York to be an example to the rest of the country, and the rest of the world, that terrorism can't stop us." His frequent communication and messages of moving forward through the crisis served as a catalyst for action.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s America was locked in a cold war with Russia and fell behind in the strategic frontier of space exploration. In May 1961 President John F. Kennedy announced, "First, I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth. No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish."

This singular goal galvanized a nation to develop new technology and educate children in math and science. The United States felt strong, resilient, and eager to move forward even long after Kennedy's untimely death.

If the leaders in your organization start griping about how tough it is, remind them

of this: in good times your team doesn't really need you, but in moments of crisis, that's when you must go out and do your job. That's when your leadership is needed.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is a measure on the minds of many. How does this concept of zen leadership tie back to employee engagement? My view is that employee engagement consists of three facets: the organization, the individual worker, and the energy that each puts into the organization.

As a leader, it is your job to engage each team member. You must find out their motivation: is it intrinsic (internal) or extrinsic (external)? If it's internal what challenges are you providing them with? What goals have you established? If the team member is extrinsically motivated what rewards have you put in place? If they don't seem motivated at all (amotivated), how are you working to find out if they can be motivated, and if not, what is your plan to move them out of your organization?

In a corresponding manner, how are each of your team members engaging with your project? What challenges and interests are they pursuing?

Finally, how much energy are both parties, you and the individual, putting into the project and the organization? Are they commensurate efforts? If not, a conversation needs to ensue, reaching common ground on commitment to the organization, the project, and individual development. This is the heart of any engagement effort.



While employee engagement is a fundamental concept, remember that it is built upon the foundation of job satisfaction. A team member stays on your project because, at a minimum he or she is satisfied with their job. Decent pay, a reasonable work environment, and a good relationship with you, the leader, will minimize turnover and keep your employee in their seat at your organization.

A Zen Koan on Anger

A fundamental Zen practice is the meditation upon a Koan, or logistical puzzle. You may have heard of the Koan, what is the sound of one hand clapping? As we contemplate this puzzle for a long period of time we find that eventually we must let go and give in to the paradox. We realize that it really doesn't matter. The hand moves and it is irrelevant whether the hand makes a noise or not.

The Koan I would like to present to you is, what is the sound of one angry employee? Think for a moment when an angry team member enters your office. They are full of energy, ready to spew their fury in your direction whether you are the target of the anger or not.

If you react and push back this serves to maintain the explosive energy. However, if you remain soft and dispassionate, the energy will dissipate, allowing both of you to have a meaningful conversation.

As I have observed people's behavior over the years I have come to the conclusion that anger is generally about an unmet expectation or an attachment to a specific

outcome.

Let's look at an example where I am taking my wife to dinner at a nice restaurant for her birthday. My expectation is that we will have excellent service and delicious food in a splendid environment. What happens if the server doesn't take our order in what I consider a reasonable amount of time? What if he or she is not attentive to our need for more water or another glass of wine? What if the food is cold and bland? I may become angry.

I may become angry because my expectation was that we would have a comfortable evening with a splendid conversation over an outstanding meal. The expectation was not met.

If I remain attached to the outcome of an outstanding meal with superior service I may become even more angry. Alternatively, if I can let go of my attachment, apologize to my lovely wife, and realize that sometimes expectations can get in the way of our happiness, then the anger dissipates.

Try it for yourself. Think back to moments when you or someone around you became angry. What were the expectations? Was there an attachment to a specific outcome?

A practice for you to put in your leadership toolkit may be to work with your team members to find out what expectations they have. They may have certain expectations regarding their role in your project, their reward once it is complete, the role of other team members, and the resources you will provide.

Work to expand the range of



expectations. Your team members may have a myopic view of the project process and outcomes. Talk about the possibilities of events and outcomes, positive and negative.

Practice nonattachment. This is an ancient concept and one that continues to serve us well today. While we may desire a certain outcome, exploring multiple scenarios and accepting an outcome different from the one we wanted can be key to maintaining a productive and engaged team.

Keep in mind, however, that there may be items that are not negotiable, such as ethics. As a leader you must clearly delineate these boundaries as part of the expectations.

A Leadership Experience

Now I'd like to come back to the moment you captured at the beginning of this article. I want you to have a sense that you can create a point of stillness, to become centered and focus when you need to. So think back again to that time when you were either leading a group or were working for a leader and you felt the group being very creative or productive and that the work just flowed. Again, capture this experience in that one instant in time.

Feel yourself in the chair and notice your breathing. Now once again visualize that experience in that instant in time. Do not move forward one moment in time or backward one moment in time. Dramatize it. See the experience more vividly. Feel it in your body. Now, while continuing to deeply experience this moment in time take the index finger of your dominant hand and lightly touch that point on your other hand or on a finger of

your other hand. Continue to experience that instant in time. Release the touch.

Listen to any sounds associated with this experience, this moment in time. Do not move forward one moment in time or backward one moment in time. Dramatize it. Hear the experience more sharply, more crisply. Now, while continuing to deeply experience this moment in time take that same finger and lightly touch the same point as before. Continue to experience that instant in time. Release the touch.

Feel any body sensations associated with this experience, this moment in time. Do not move forward one moment in time or backward one moment in time. Dramatize it. Feel the experience in your body more intensely. Now, while continuing to deeply experience this moment in time take that same finger and lightly touch the same point as before. Continue to experience that instant in time. Release the touch.

Notice which sense was the most powerful for you—the image, the sound, or the body sensation.

Now think of a future task where you must lead. Visualize one instant in time when you are in this future leadership role. Make a snapshot of it in time and do not move forward one moment in time or backward one moment in time. Dramatize it, feel yourself leading the group and feeling how everything is flowing so well. Touch that same point on your hand or fingers. See the experience more vividly.

Maintain the touch and hear the sounds in that one instant in time. Do not move



forward one moment in time or backward one moment in time. Dramatize it, feel yourself leading the group and feeling how everything is flowing so well, and hear the experience more crisply.

Maintain the touch and feel your body in that one instant in time. Do not move forward one moment in time or backward one moment in time. Dramatize it, feel yourself leading the group and feeling how everything is flowing so well, and feel it deeper in your body.

Maintain the touch, and in this moment, on a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your ability to lead? How confident are you that you can lead in this moment? How does the number you just picked compare to the number you started with? Know that you

can always come back to this moment of leadership by touching that point.

I hope this little exercise and our discussion about leadership provides you some tools that you and other leaders in your organization can use.

Recap

So let's review the highlights... Even in times of chaos, find that moment of stillness. I hope that through this article you have been able to find such a moment. Secondly, your most important task as a leader is to focus—focus on the goals and vision of your project. Lastly, when anger erupts, find the expectations or attachments.

I wish you much success on your leadership journey.



Key Concepts

Find a Point of Stillness

Leadership is Focus

- Vision
- Goals

Choices

- Choices Every Moment in Our Daily Lives
- Many Things We Cannot Control

Lessons From Evolutionary Psychology

- In Good Times Strong Leadership is Considered Micro-Management
- In Times of Crisis Strong Leadership is Desired to Show the Way Forward

Employee Engagement

- The Organization
- The Individual
- Energy
- Foundation is Job Satisfaction

Anger

- Expectations
- Attachments

Bio

Joel DiGirolamo facilitates workshops and seminars for organizations to assist in building their leadership capability and team productivity. He has over 30 years of staff and management experience in Fortune 500 companies. He has a BSEE, MBA, and an MS Psychology degree and is the author of the award-winning books *Leading Team Alpha* and *Yoga in No Time at All*. The combination of his diverse work experience and education enable him to relate to individuals at all levels and positions of any organization in any region of the world. His broad experience has allowed him to successfully lead and participate on teams of individuals with unique backgrounds and various motivations. Joel has been a keynote speaker at several international conferences, is a member of the American Psychological Association (APA), the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

Key Words

leadership, employee engagement, Zen, anger, stillness, expectations, attachment