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## Talking with Sled Dogs – Leading from Behind

By Sam Magill

Imagine coaching a group of highly committed individuals who have worked together for a long time. They know the territory better than you do and are more at home in the particular business environment than you are. What's more, they are so skilled at their craft that they work from an instinct that is not immediately obvious. They are alert to changes in the situation that you miss entirely. If that isn't enough, they know whom the real movers and shakers are in the organization and don't pay much attention to people who wave their arms a lot without effect.

I've experienced this as a manager, consultant and coach, but the scene described above did not occur with other people. It happened in Calgary, Alberta, with sled dogs while visiting Will Black, who teaches leadership to people by placing them in unfamiliar environments. The experience exposed me to a culture rich in relationships, purpose, invitation, and faith. And it exposed me to my own needs for control.

There's an old saying, perhaps from China, that if you want to be a leader, find a parade and get in front. Part of the difficulty of working with sled dogs is that there's a fast moving parade, but the human is at the back of it, being dragged through the snow. It was certainly the most challenging "coaching" engagement I've had and it brought new meaning to the term "flawless".

Like most engagements, this one had several phases: the test ride, the plan, relationships, the jump to action and review. The test ride was like riding in a flight simulator – it's safe with a taste of the real thing. The plan was just that – what we planned to do. Relationships had to be formed in advance since there would be no time once we jumped to action. The jump to action separated talk from the real thing. The review anchored what I had learned so I could use it again.

### Test Ride

Before going solo with a team of dogs, I needed to get a feel for the team and the medium. So Will took me out with nine dogs. He was the driver and I was freight. Each dog, he said, produced a force of 300 pounds. Nine dogs deliver 2700 pounds of thrust – enough so that the "driver" cannot physically control the team.

My first lesson was to be quiet and watch. How many times do we think as leaders and coaches that we have to say a lot to show we're in charge? In this case, too much talking confuses the team and leads to their ignoring what the leader says – a phenomenon that also happens in our human teams. After a quiet ride, Will offered me the chance to ride on the sled's runners. I was to continue to stay silent and let him do the talking because the team knew his voice – I was a stranger. An experience I had in a large manufacturing company came to mind, where managers were reassigned regularly as if they were interchangeable parts. Then management wondered why no one listened.

The next part of practice was a sport called skijoring. Whoever invented it is fortunately not available to me. It involved my body being hitched to two dogs while my feet were locked into cross country skis. I am not a novice at cross country, but after spending the first hour being dragged on my face, I wanted a change. This lesson called me to balance between saying the word "stay", and keeping the team interested in the project and my



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voice. They looked frequently for Will and the other dogs (who were off having fun) until I demanded stopping.

What was the coaching lesson? Go out on a practice run to see what the team does when it's working well – before intervening. Get into their medium AND insist on a few ground rules. Say what you mean – and then be quiet. When I was tired of being on my face, I first worked only on the rules of stopping and staying stopped. I put my skis across the trail and held them there until all was quiet. I practiced getting up without being pulled forward. Then, and only then, I said “hike” – quietly was enough. I'm not advocating for coaches to be rule makers, only that we must come to some agreements about language and ground rules before doing substantive work.

## **The plan:**

To add to the next phase of adventure, Will arranged a midnight outing with light snow thrown in for extra fun. The first thing I noticed was that all the preparation and planning had only a vague correspondence to really doing it; planning was safe, a concept, an ideal, easy, no strain on anybody. A very low level of commitment.

In our fast-paced organizations, I sometimes see enormous attention to planning as if it were the real thing. That's not to say that it isn't important, just not the same. Furthermore, with an eager team who knows what they are doing, long planning becomes distracting. It's as though the team says, “Get on with it or let us go home. Being in this harness is fine as long as we're doing something!” The more fun the better; and, in this case, better means running. Besides, if we're going into unknown territory, planning simply can't be perfect.

## **Relationship**

Before this whole system went into action, there were a few more details. Since the dogs were more skilled than I, it was important to take time to get to know them before expecting cooperation. In this case getting to know each other simply meant spending time together doing the simple tasks of living. Literally it meant cleaning the yard where they're kept, feeding them, and clipping their toe nails. For dogs, the latter is a very intimate act and, if allowed to do it, I was clearly making progress. It was their choice!

The simple relationship created by simple acts of service and time spent hanging out together skijoring provided a crucial foundation. In an organization where I managed a group of consultants I once helped with a simple task of opening hundreds of envelopes from 360 degree feedback forms. While doing it my boss walked in and chastised me for wasting my time. The task was beneath my position, she said. Well, so was scooping up dog litter, but when push came to shove the relationship I built made all the difference in the world.

## **The jump to action**

There comes a moment when it's time to move from planning to action. During the harnessing phase, a stout rope holds the sled and dogs to a full size pickup. To move out, one stands on the sled's runners and pulls a trigger release. The dogs know what's coming and bark, howl and jump in a frenzy of anticipation.

I stepped on the runners, grabbed the release trigger, and .....stepped off. My body seemed to know that once I released the sled, I was no longer in charge. So, I went unconsciously to Will to ask a question. Any question would do; I didn't even have one.



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This is the edge of faith. Faith in my teacher, faith in the dogs, faith in the snow on the ground and the weather, faith in myself and ultimately faith in the relationship I had with the dogs. This is the edge of action – a different domain in which I'm really along for the ride into their territory. My leadership was not of my own doing alone – it would have to be more like a dance with a partner who knows the steps better than I. I've also experienced this as the edge of coaching when the client takes over. Some coaches call it leading from behind. Perhaps our job is merely to release the team. If we don't let go, the team is ever dependent on our wisdom, which is inadequate for them to live on.

Will advised me to either get on and go or put the dogs in the truck. The greatest number of fights occurs when the dogs are hooked up and anchored. They are committed to work, i.e. running. And when they don't get to do it they turn to their next commitment: settling who's in charge among them – and the cost to the loser and winner is high. How often do we create teams of capable people, only to let them sit idle with vague purposes and tasks? Or, worse yet, occupy their time in areas to which they are not committed? (I think of a parallel here of people who attend staff meetings in which nothing important happens – no tooth and claw but lots of whining).

At last, I pulled the release, said my Hail Mary's and flew down the dark trail. It was exhilarating! Snow flying, dogs barking briefly, then silence except for my quiet epithets.

Our plan had been for me to turn at the first trail junction and stop until I saw Will's head lamp. So, I turned, called to the lead dog, Sakani, and collected on the relationship she and I had built skijoring: she stopped quickly. I planted the snow anchor, and keeping one hand on the sled (never, never let go of the sled) looked for Will.

I saw his light and stepped back on the runners. Then leaned over to pull the anchor and called to the lead. Silence. Nothing happened. I starred in disbelief. The dogs were gone. Gone! My mind raced. Then recalling Will's advice to say a little as possible and never get excited, I called twice to Sakani, to stop. My head lamp illuminated four pairs of red eyes looking back at me. Stay, Sakani, Stay.

Will came around the corner expecting me to be moving and nearly ran me down. He stopped. I said in a quiet sort of way: "We have a problem". He, too, starred in disbelief.

Now here is where plans don't count. Relationship and communication and staying connected and inventing are the way out. Will asked me to stand in front of his team: they are so loyal to him that they were likely to follow him forward. He approached my team since they knew him better than they did me. When he got to them (Sakani had stayed as I asked.) he first straightened them out – to get the antagonists on the team separated – then called me.

Quietly, slowly, I walked on the trail until I got to Sakani. Then I stepped off the trail up to my knees in unpacked snow and lead Sakani back to the sled. Again, invention mattered. If the team started to run, we were dead. The four of them were much stronger than Will and I. I picked Sakani's front feet up so that she hopped her way back to the sled. It neutralized her strength and is the method for getting the dogs from kennel to truck – but it's not generally used on the trail. The others followed her as I made a wide circle to avoid fights. Once back at the sled, we made the same circle again to get pointed back down the trail and found out what had happened – an old rope with a broken knot.

## Review of the event

The sequence in this breakdown is important.

1. I saw and acknowledged that something unexpected had happened.
2. I called on my relationship with the lead.
3. I stayed calm and quiet so to not introduce more trouble. No arm waving allowed.
4. I called on the available expertise.
5. As a team, we invented a solution one step at a time. We did not sit down and plan it abstractly. All of it was in action. If the action worked, we kept going, if not, we made up a new step.
6. There was no blame anywhere.
7. Once resolved, we got moving on the primary commitment – running.

The rest of the trip consisted of checking turns on the route, building my and Sakani's ability to communicate about turns and enjoying the ride. Back at the truck, my job again became the steward: water, praise and a warm box on the truck for each dog.

## Learnings

So, what does this adventure have to do with coaching and leading based on stewardship, relationships, and faith in human organizations? If **stewardship** is choosing service over self interest, then the simple acts of tending the needs of the team must be the beginning and the end. No fancy program or set of principles or strategies can replace them. Some of the acts are spoken, some are in silence. Many would be called menial.

**Relationships** begin before the adventure and are the basis for success. They are all there is to call on when plans come unknotted. They are strengthened by making requests and not pushing it. (When I was cutting the dogs' toenails, I let them walk away when they wanted to, then called them back. When they'd had enough of my clumsiness, we stopped for the time being). Unless relationships have choice for all the parties, they are a dictatorship.

**Faith** in each other and our ability to figure out what to do next provides a foundation for venturing into the unknown. Each time we make a change, take on a new project, or have a meeting is a venture into unknown territory. Since there is no guarantee, it is an act of faith.

When we call to the team we are making an **invitation**. If they don't accept it, we must start once again by doing the simple tending. I'm very clear that humans and dogs aren't the same and business is not exactly the same as going for a sled ride, but don't we sometimes make assumptions about our relationships with people that even a dog wouldn't accept?

As for "flawless", in my experience planning for perfection is a formula for falling short. Strong relationships between skilled partners and exercising faith in each other over and over during action are as close to flawlessness as we're going to get – or need to be.

Author: Samuel P. Magill, Edmonds, Washington. All rights reserved. Originally printed in Flawless Consulting Field Guide and Companion by Peter Block



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