

The Code of the Old West is New Again

Leadership Lessons Learned, by Rhea Blanken

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Our news is peppered by reports of government and corporate indiscretions and ethical breeches. One wonders if today's ethics are merely tomorrow's cliches. Can one individual's behavior demonstrate the value of having values sufficient to improve the community? If you read the stories of the American cowboys, the answer is YES!

I just read [*Cowboy Ethics: What Wall Street Can Learn from the Code of the West*](#) by James P. Owen. Included in this incredible photography book of modern cowboy life are words of wisdom for Wall Street, government, the association community and our personal lives. Owen's simple words illustrate the American West we have seen enshrined in classic western movies and poetry. From John Wayne's "**Red River**" to Robert Duvall's "**Open Range**," cowboys are heroic figures living by a code, the violation of which could result in death.

The following list comes directly from Code of the West. How does it reflect your organization?

- *Live each day with courage.* As Owen said, "Real courage is being scared to death and saddling up, anyway." It is also being willing to speak up and say that something isn't right, even if that means going up against partners, colleagues or superiors. Is staff able to counter board directives? As your association focuses on its future, how open is its leadership dialogue?
- *Take pride in your work.* With every communication, program and event your association produces, your image and influence are spotlighted. What you say or don't say, do or don't do are present for evaluation. Does staff "sweat the details"? Is staff looking out for the association's image or just getting their jobs done? Is there a part of the job they disdain and delegate to another rather than be responsible for its completion?

- *Always finish what you start.* As John Wayne said in “**Red River**,” “...remember this, every man who signs on for the (cattle) drive agrees to finish it. There’ll be no quitting along the way...not by me, not by you.” How does staff experience your board finishing what they start? Do they feel you are moving forward together? Do the board members second-guess themselves and change what they start? Maybe some don’t even start on the drive at all?
- *Do what has to be done.* A cowboy stood up for what he valued and for his fellow cowboys. He knew that keeping his honor in tact might mean risking it from time to time. He defended what needed defending. Is your association’s staff willing to risk its reputation by standing up for what is right; telling your members they might be heading down the wrong path; or challenging the board’s decisions?
- *Be tough, but fair.* In the Old West, the Golden Rule was often the key to one’s survival. As John Wayne said in “**The Shootist**,” “*I won’t be wronged, I won’t be insulted, and I won’t be laid a hand on. I don’t do these things to others, and I require the same from them.*” How does your staff demonstrate the Golden Rule? Do they look out for each other while demanding their best work be done?
- *When you make a promise, keep it.* For cowboys, a handshake was a bond and keeping one’s word a badge of honor. But your promises are broken daily: boards to fund their goals; staff to complete work on time; and even parts of your mission statement. What’s your association’s reputation for giving and keeping its word? Which “unfortunate circumstances outside of our control” regularly interfere? Or are promises so constrained that only mediocre ones are made?
- *Ride for the brand.* When a cowboy rides for the brand, he makes a commitment and remains loyal to it even if the going gets tough. They were loyal to their values and to those who uphold them. When your members accept board positions, do they promise to ride for the brand and do their best to advance what it stands for, going beyond their own agendas? Your staff, what do they ride for? Are they just doing enough to get by?
- *Talk less and say more.* We have all heard the expression “talk is cheap.” Cowboys were typically doers not big talkers so this saying definitely applied to them. They personified talking straight and getting right to the point. How is that

going for you and your organization – too many meetings that get nowhere? Too many reports with too little of their ideas realized?

- *Remember that some things aren't for sale.* Values, principles and ethics are not for sale. Your association's image, its opportunity to influence and impact are not for sale. Sponsorships are designed to sell your name while partnerships extend your value. Which does your organization practice? What is your organization's reputation? Is it contributing its knowledge to the greater community?

- *Know when to draw the line.* We say rules are meant to be broken when creating a future focused organization. Maybe, maybe not. Surely principles are not to be broken. Once after observing unethical behavior, I was told "we didn't do anything illegal." That doesn't mean it was right! How does your organization determine when and where to draw the line?

"If you reach the end of your rope, go to the knot and hang on."– David W. Stevenson, Cowboy Wisdom

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