

Future Lessons From Past Leaders: Lewis & Clark Corps of Discovery

Beyond the job description - Sacagawea's lasting contribution

Last of three parts by Rhea Blanken

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Through examination of the Lewis & Clark Corps of Discovery's expedition, the reviewer cannot help but be impressed by the extra-ordinary partnership Meriwether Lewis & William Clark demonstrated as co-leaders. The Corps itself persevered for well over two years in a unique partnership. At times, their logistical and resource choices might have been erroneous (based on incorrect assumptions and unconscious biases), yet the Corps learned to take advantage of even their failures as they moved the expedition forward.

They used their scouting, hunting, blacksmith skills and army experience to guarantee their survival every day. On their journey, they counted on receiving information and navigational guidance from trappers, traders and Indians to refine their course, gain knowledge of the wilderness and secure their survival. Several interpreters were enrolled for support.

Lesson 5: Make contribution your responsibility

While the Corps of Discovery carried the names of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark as co-leaders, Sacagawea is now the third best-known and recognized member of that expedition. She has more statues dedicated to her in the US than any other American woman. Two sites along the expedition's path are named after her, Sacagawea River and Sacagawea Spring. In 2000, a US silver dollar was dedicated to her and in 2001, President Clinton named her an honorary sergeant in the regular army. It is considered likely that without her going above and beyond her job description of interpreter's wife, the Corps success would have been greatly reduced.

Lewis & Clark wanted her along from the moment guide, Charbonneau, her French husband, requested she accompany him on the journey. They knew that having a woman travel with a party of men was seen as a “token of peace” by Indians, assuring the Corps was not hostile even though they carried lots of firepower and were mostly made up of military men. They also assumed she would be invaluable when they reached the Shoshone Indians, since that was her native tribe. When they had their first formal meeting with the Shoshone chief, she was the translator. The chief turned out to be her brother!

Sacagawea was invaluable from the moment the Corps left the Mandan Village – from her knowledge of edible roots and plants that provided food and medicine throughout the expedition, to rescuing irreplaceable papers swept overboard.

Lesson 6: Job descriptions are only part of what’s possible

Many other Indian women along the journey were of critical assistance and yet the observations recorded by the men represented women along their journey as second-class citizens. The roles and responsibilities they assigned them were far short of their actual capabilities and their expectations of value for the expedition initially were underestimated.

Fixed in the Corps’ mind was an interpretation of women that had Sacagawea and other native women’s efforts invisible when they were really extraordinary. Their writings and reports all too often demonstrated unexamined biases rather than opportunities to experience full partnerships with those along their journey. For example: The Corps did not know or realize that only Indian women, not the men, were allowed to touch the land – thus keeping the land uncontaminated. Gathering crops and searching for healing roots were sacred acts of women while the Corps saw it as drudgery. Women were also in control of their work and owned what they produced while women of the new democracy did not.

It matters now more than ever how we encourage or thwart contribution from others eager to go beyond their roles or to expand their responsibilities. As broad social change continues and our society and culture expands, we must recognize our historic preconceptions and be prepared to modify them. Our convenient blindness to rigid governance structures and passé employment systems helps

hinder initiative and innovation. The legacy Sacagawea embodied was one of team members empowering one another to go beyond expectations, for reaching beyond one's current position and not to limit contribution.

"I have seen that in any great under-taking, it is not enough for a man to depend simply upon himself." – Lone Man-Teton Sioux

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