

Continuous Improvement Leadership Lessons from Noah's Ark

Ten ideas to improve your leadership performance.

by Larry Fast

This column is based on material I used years ago for a roundtable discussion. Unfortunately, the author of the Noah's Ark quotes is unknown. However, that author put some very clever thinking into their idea. I was struck by how relevant these quotes are when applied to leadership in a continuous improvement culture. Perhaps you can lead your own roundtable discussion with your team.

"Everything I need to know about life, I learned from Noah's Ark."

1. **"Don't miss the boat."** Procrastinators beware. Leaders who say they're going to get started on continuous improvement "when things calm down" are lying to themselves and to their people. These are the worst kind of bosses. All talk and no show. Anyone who isn't moved to lead the team to improve quality, constraint management, delivery performance and cost should be put on notice to either lead or leave.
2. **"Remember that we are all in the same boat!"** If any function in the business is not aligned, then improvement possibilities will not be maximized and, in fact, may be undermined. Performance improvements depend on the right team of people coming together to improve the business one project at a time. Everyone in leadership needs to understand the big picture and think like a business manager, not just a functional manager.
3. **"Plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark."** Anticipation is a trait that, unfortunately, isn't present in every gene pool. Usually this trait is instinctive to great leaders, but it can also be learned. My Little League baseball coach, in fact, taught us how to anticipate in practice. He asked us to anticipate overthrows to bases and where to position ourselves to prevent a base runner from advancing. He taught us to warn players who were running for a foul ball pop up, or the outfield fence, and were at risk of crashing into the fence and hurting themselves. My favorite Wayne Gretzky quote: "I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been."
4. **"Stay fit. When you're 60 years old, someone may ask you to do something really big."** They may also ask you to do something really big today! Are you prepared? It's more than being physically fit. The larger question: Is your mindset fit for leading CI with both competent leadership and a vision for change?
5. **"Don't listen to critics; just get on with the job that needs to be done."** See No. 1 above. Raising important questions is important, even critical, and should be debated by the team. That said, once the decisions have been made, the losers of the debate must respect the decisions that have been made and get to rowing the boat in

the same direction as the winners of the debate. At this point everyone on the team should be bought in. If not, then it's time to start parting company with the dissenters. Life's too short to be pushing a rope.

6. **"Build your future on high ground."** To me this means building a future based on high standards that are set from the top, i.e., to do whatever is necessary to become a truly world-class company. This requires that the board of directors, the CEO and the corporate leadership team get themselves up to speed with CI thinking. Acquiring and developing the basic understanding of what it takes to deliver nearly flawless planning and execution is the example that employees across the company are waiting to see from the top. Once the "high ground" leaders are up to speed, they must collectively deliver this clear message to all employees: the voting is over. Time for everyone to get on board. We are committed to the journey of continuous improvement. This is how companies can build their culture and future successes on the high ground of a career-long commitment to CI.
7. **"For safety's sake, travel in pairs."** This, of course, applies directly to the shop floor, the distribution centers, hazardous material storage, etc., during the normal course of everyday work. Each of us is always for our own safety, but we're also alert for teammates who may not see a hazard, may be distracted, may be at risk of getting hurt. The team objective is to have a zero OSHA incident rate everywhere in the business. All leaders must be alert and set the example by never walking past a potential hazard. Leaders must "walk the talk" on safety just like everyone else.
8. **"Speed isn't always an advantage. The snails were on board with the cheetahs."** We've all seen the news as well as ads on TV that show serious injuries or death by people driving at a high rate of speed. In that context, "speed kills" people. In a CI context, however, speed in our business model kills. It kills competitors who are still mired in a batch scheduling mode, have huge amounts of cash stuck in inventory, have long cycle times relative to competition. Speed can also kill suppliers who "don't get it" and expect factories to stock two or three months of raw material inventories to prevent outages in the shop while they maintain lead times in months instead of days. Other suppliers often can step up to meet expectations and take away the lion's share of the business. Lean principles create a huge speed advantage compared to those stuck in the status quo.

The snail in this context represents the ever-present quest for CI, chipping away with kaizen projects and innovations while the cheetahs only work in short bursts of energy and don't sustain. Snails improve processes forever.

9. **"When you're stressed, float awhile."** No, this doesn't mean to just go with the flow and create a void in leadership for some period. Whenever any leader begins to behave differently, the rest of the workers will notice it immediately. They may be concerned (but afraid to mention it) or say something to their peers, such as, "Have you noticed how tired and uptight the boss has become the last few weeks? I wonder what's up?" Or, they may decide to park their brains at the front door for a while because that's what the boss is doing. Being less of a leader is unfair to those around you.

Instead, have a conversation with your boss to discuss your need for a breather. Over the years I can't even guess how many times I've heard coworkers in the fourth quarter of the year gripe that "I've got four weeks of vacation and I'm going to end up giving three of them back. I've got so much on my plate it isn't worth it to come back to the mess I'll have after a week." (Hint: Take two weeks at a time. Everyone will wait on you for a week. If you're off for two weeks, your appointed leader can't wait that long and must do something!) Be sure that you have provided the proper mentoring and spent the time it takes for your backup person to learn what and how to deal with issues that may arise. Give them the confidence to be decisive without fear or you'll come back and be unhappy with decisions taken. This is invaluable for their personal development and for you to take all your vacation time without being stressed out.

10. "Remember, the Ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic by professionals."

Continuous improvement zealots who use lean thinking and lean/Six Sigma tools will outperform professionals (and anybody else) who don't.

Larry Fast is founder and president of Pathways to Manufacturing Excellence and a veteran of 35 years in the wire and cable industry. He is the author of "The 12 Principles of Manufacturing Excellence: A Leader's Guide to Achieving and Sustaining Excellence." For more information and other articles, click [here](#).