The Four Wires of Leadership

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I recently was talking to a man living in our community who I have come to respect and who has become something of a teacher for me. His name is Keven O'Brian and he served for many years on a US Aircraft Carrier – the Lexington. Keven told me that the flight deck on an aircraft carrier is one of the most dangerous places to be – whatever your role on the carrier. He also described the mechanism in place for jets as they land on the carrier after completing their mission. There are four arrest wires on the deck of the carrier that are intended to stop the jet (which hooks to the wire and comes to a stop, after which the jet is moved off the runway and stowed below deck).

The key issue is: which wire will stop the jet. If the first jet is stopped by the first wire then the challenge is not only for the pilot to recover from the abrupt stop but also for the landing crew to tow the plane off the main runway to a side runway (air craft carriers have a small runway that extends out to the port (left) side of the carrier). If the jet isn't stopped until the fourth wire then there is the anxiety experienced by the pilot and carrier crew as to whether or not the jet will be stopped at all (crashing instead into the tower of the carrier or skipping off the stern of the carrier). If the plane has sufficient speed then it can regain altitude and circle for another landing—but this often isn't possible.

As I mentioned, the first wire is not a great place to stop—it means that the plane was coming in too low or too fast. A first wire stop is not only hard on the pilot—it results in real strain on the wire and the crew (who have to get the plane away from the landing area. The best landing occurs when the jet stops at the second or third wire. Not too soon and not too late. Kind of like how leadership should be engaged in an organization – not too abrupt and not too slow. A bit delayed so that the situation can be accurately assessed, but not too long a delay that could lead either to a critical situation (that might be too late to address) or to action that no longer fits with the ever-changing situation.

I will draw an analogy between wires on the carrier and styles of leadership. Let's conceive of the leader of a team as an arrest wire and their team as the plane that is landing on the carrier. I would like to got into more detail about what this analogy might look like and what we might gain from a more detailed analysis with regard to the coaching of a leader.

First Wire Leadership

This type of leadership would be very controlling. I reflect back to the classic theories of leadership style offered by Blake and Mouton and by Hersey and Blanchard. When I dust off these theories, I find that first wire leadership would be comparable to Blake and Mouton's 9/1 leadership style and Hersey and Blanchard's sector one leadership. First wire leadership might be appropriate if the team is moving in the wrong direction (too low) or is moving too fast (not careful enough in their considerations).

This first wire style of leadership is not appropriate when it stopes the team abruptly—that is when the leader exerts too much control and authority. Unfortunately, first wire leadership can be very addictive. It is exciting when the plane hits the first wire and stops abruptly. It is exciting (crisis management) when the crew must shove the plane off the runway. A lot of addictive neurochemicals undoubtedly are released for the pilot and carrier crew – but the resulting addictive rush can lead to further bad decisions and eventually to individual and collective exhaustion.

Second Wire Leadership

This is often the best wire—not too near the stern of the carrier--yet does not yield an abrupt stop (like first wire leadership). As Blake and Mouton suggested, second wire leadership is an effective blending of task and relationship. Hersey and Blanchard similarly describe this sector two leadership as appropriate for a team that has earned the trust of their leader (with regard to setting high but realistic goals, possessing task-related expertise and exhibiting an effective mode of operations as a team)—much as in the case of the pilot who comes in at the right angle and at the right speed. The pilot who is stopped by the second arresting wire might not generate as much initial excitement as the first wire pilot—but this pilot generates much less stress on either the wire or the crew.

Third Wire Leadership

It is fine that a plot stops at this third wire—though it might at times be too close to the fourth wire for the pilot and crew to feel comfortable. Still an acceptable stopping point, especially if the crew recognizes that the pilot knows "what he/she is doing".

For the leader of a team, third wire leadership is about an emphasis on relationship and not so much task. This style of leadership (in either the Blake and Mouton or Hersey and Blanchard model) is for

older and more experienced teams. On the aircraft carrier, the more "seasoned" crew members and pilots aren't stressed out when the plane stops at the third wire—they've seen it many times before.

Fourth Wire Leadership

This type of landing of a plane on a carrier is a real "heart stopper" It's got to work—or the pilot and crew are in trouble. This is where the analogy to leadership of a team tends to break down – and offers an alternative insight regarding this fourth style of leadership. There is minimal attention to either task or relationship in Blake and Mouton and Hershey and Blanchard's fourth style. This means that either the team doesn't really need a leader any more or the leader is now indifferent to the operations of this team. Like the first wire leadership, wire four leadership often produces crisis – and requires crisis management. But this crisis is distinct—it is about indifference not control.

The fourth wire leader only directs much attention to his team when there is a big problem. These wire four leaders become "heroes" who come in at the last minute to "save the day." They offer temporary fixes to the problem being faced and they focus on identifying those "guilty" of getting to this point. The guilty party can be the team (pilot), the broader organization (the ground crew), or (3) the "fates" (weather, military budget, pentagon ineptitude).

Coaching the Four Wires

When providing coaching services to the leader of an organization it can be quite useful to keep this four wire analogy in mind. We need to not just help our leader focus on their own role as leader (serving as the arrestor wire), but also help their focus on the functioning and dynamics of their team (the incoming plane) and the broader structure and support of their organization (the carrier and its crew). It is also important to assist our coaching client in determining when their primary role is serving to stop or at least slow down or redirect the "flight" of their team, but also serve as the launching apparatus – serving as a motivator, initiator and champion. In many instances, our leader is also on the plane with their team – rolling up their own sleeves to make the flight successful.

Perhaps of greatest importance in the use of this wire analogy is the distinction to be drawn between the crisis created by pulling the team short too soon (first wire leadership) and waiting too long to exert appropriate authority and control (fourth wire leadership). Both styles of leadership can lead to crisis—but the crises need to be managed in different ways. The failure of first wire leadership concerns too great a span of authority and control for the leader—and too often an unpredictable or ill-timed

exercise of this authority and control. Conversely, the fourth wire style of leadership often leads to either a very narrow span of authority and control (assigned by others in the organization or self-assigned by the wire four leader).

The exercise of authority and control only occurs when the team (or overall organization) is in crisis and is looking anywhere for someone to take charge or at least assume responsibility (and often subsequently being assigned all of the blame – as a convenient scapegoat). If the wire four leader is reticent to step in, then the team (and other members of the organization) might be inclined to "collude" in manufacturing the crisis (or creating the false image of the crisis) to get the leader's attention or at least shatter the leader's seeming apathy and indifference to the fate of the team and (more broadly) welfare of the organization.

These are all very important issues to be addressed in a coaching session. The first step might be to bringing up the four-wire analogy and determine which wire is most often descriptive of the leader's way of working with their team. As Keven O'Brien has noted, the flight deck on a carrier can be a very dangerous place. We need thoughtful and self-reflective leaders to assist in making the landing of planes (and the performance of teams) a bit less dangerous—and remaining intact for the next important mission.