

PUBLICATION

Leadership Lessons I Learned from ABC's *Lost*

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From 2004 through 2010, I was transfixed (and probably a little addicted) to the hit ABC hit show *Lost*. From the pilot episode, Ellen and I were hooked. You likely remember *Lost*, which is built around a commercial airline that crash lands on a mysterious island and the subsequent journey of the plane's survivors. The show was tinged with elements of the supernatural and science fiction built around flashbacks and flash-forwards, all the while ensuring that numbers 4, 8, 15, 16, 23, and 42 were typed into a computer in the "Hatch," lest the world would end (until, spoiler alert, it didn't...or did it?).

It was "Must See TV" for us throughout the entire series. Like a lot of people, we lost (no pun intended) interest as the seasons wore on but were then reenergized as the series wound to its ultimate conclusion during its final season. We dissected episodes, talked about it with friends, and certainly were a part of the *Lost* fandom. One of my colleagues even organized weekly lunches during the fall to talk about the prior episode's story; she called it the "Lostinacci Lunch" because I was such a passionate fan.

When the series ended, the studio held an online auction of props and items from the show, including the iconic VW bus, costumes that the characters wore on the show, and other items that they had used over the many seasons. I was such an avid fan that I actually bid on and won the director's chair assigned to Dominic Monaghan, who played Charlie Pace (a member of the fictionalized rock band Drive Shaft) in the show. I have the chair proudly displayed in my office with the *Lost* logo and *Charlie* written on one side. Call me crazy, but occasionally when I need some deep-thinking time, I will hop up in the chair, stare out my window, and see if I can channel a little Drive Shaft musical insight.

A good friend, knowing of my love of *Lost*, recently sent me a copy of the *Lost* pilot script signed by the entire cast. In reflecting on the series, I thought about the many great leadership lessons I learned from watching the series that still impact my journey today.

1. *The Constant*

One of the most awarded episodes of *Lost* was the fifth episode of the fourth season, called *The Constant*. The episode centers on the character Desmond Hume and his ex-girlfriend Penny Widmore. The episode, which was nominated for multiple Emmys, focused on the time-travel, time-warp that Desmond is stuck in. After seeing a rat suffer a brain aneurysm brought on by similar time-lapsing, the character Daniel Faraday, a physicist, tells Desmond that he must find something or something as his constant in each time period he is jumping between. Desmond concludes that Penny is his constant and once he makes contact with her in each distinct era, he stops alternating between worlds.

Leaders benefit from ensuring they lead with consistency and constancy. Followers are looking to their leaders to set a confident, realistic, and consistent tone and approach in their efforts. Too often leaders bounce between multiple messages, initiatives, or even moods. As a follower, it is hard to keep up with and the priorities and goals get lost in the conflicting approaches. The most effective leaders determine their true north star, those characteristics, beliefs, and tenets that will guide their actions, words, and execution. Then they stick to them. This does not mean that shifts in approach will not occur, or market dynamics or competitive forces will not lead to pivoting direction. Rather, in the midst of the uncertainty and complexity of the

marketplace, a leader's integrity, character, and defined expectations will serve as the constant for the team or organization.

Make sure you are crystal clear about the values and character that define your leadership and your actions. Spend some time considering the top five characteristics you value the most. There are dozens of lists of values and leadership characteristics, including authenticity, optimism, innovation, empathy, teamwork, excellence, gratitude, joy, justice, trust, resolve, humor, vision, and humility, to name a few. Which five drive your thoughts, actions, and passion? Write them on a piece of paper. If you want to get really serious about nailing down your leadership efforts, ask your colleagues, clients, and family members to tell you what they view as your top leadership traits and see if they match up with what you think. This can be a great way to nail down the true values that will become your constant in leading others. Once you commit to your top five, display them in a place you can regularly review to check yourself. At the end of the *Lost* episode, we learn that the scientist, Faraday, carried a journal with him everywhere that included a notation that Desmond Hume was his constant...!

2. Getting Unstuck

I mentioned above, the button in the Hatch that had to be pushed every 108 minutes (which also happens to be the sum of the numbers to be pushed.) Initially, we see Desmond following the protocol, which required that he push the series of buttons within a four-minute period every 108 minutes. Ultimately Desmond flees the hatch thinking the computer has been permanently damaged. The passengers who survived the crash of Oceanic Flight 815, fix the computer and begin again pushing the buttons every 108 minutes until at some point they don't.

Like the characters in *Lost* who continued following the protocol of pressing the buttons every 108 minutes without really understanding or knowing the consequences of stopping, as leaders we can get stuck in a rut keeping the same policies or procedures in place or taking the same actions year-in and year-out, without regularly taking the time to step back and ask if they are still appropriate, needed, and/or beneficial. We keep taking the same action because that has been how we have always done it.

Some of the best advice I ever received is to "selectively forget the past." Dartmouth College professor Vijay Govindarajan, in his book *The Three Box Solution*, encourages that leaders should step back and analyze the policies, procedures, and actions they are taking to determine whether they are still valuable to your organization, your team, or even you personally. Selectively forgetting the past involves what he calls "destructive thinking," where you question and reassess which programs, initiatives, rules, processes, or tools no longer have value to the team, but they continue because "it is always how we have done it." Inertia is a powerful force in our life, but great leadership demands regularly stepping back and fully analyzing whether you need to keep that initiative in place, or whether you really need to keep pressing a series of random buttons every 108 minutes. Maybe it is time to spend some time thinking about pruning activities, expenditures, or policies that are no longer necessary to your strategic endeavors.

3. The Smoke Monster

If you are like me and most leaders I know, imposter syndrome can creep in when you begin to doubt your efforts, your actions, and your leadership. You may occasionally think that your colleagues are going to realize that you don't really know what you are doing and will move you out of leadership. It is important for leaders to display confidence so that those following you have comfort that you have a clear direction in where the team, group, or company is headed. I believe this must be a humble confidence, where you are always willing to listen to constructive feedback, admit mistakes, and adjust course when required. This can be hard.

When you are always out front, with others looking to you in order to take their cues, it is natural to let doubt and insecurities creep in. A little voice in your head pops up to tell you that you don't know what you're doing,

or you've got no business leading the group or company. I know all about this voice because I hear it occasionally, too. Our insecurities have a way of showing up at inopportune times and places. When this occurs to me, I think about how it could be beneficial to have our very own "Smoke Monster" following us around. In *Lost*, when the castaways begin exploring the island after their crash, an eerie, smoke-like being appears to wreak havoc on them. It is a black cloud that could change shape and perspective. This was a mysterious "thing" that ultimately was unmasked as the "Man in Black."

Lost fans around the globe, and even the cast and crew, were unsure who or what the Smoke Monster was. Some suggested the monster was a metaphor for people's troubled pasts. Some thought it was there to make characters confront and face the bad choices from their past. Years after the wrap-up of the series, ideas continue to abound. Actor Daniel Dae Kim, who played Jin, said, "I remember thinking that the Smoke Monster must be some kind of mirror into your consciousness, and your goodness as a human being."

I tended to think that the Smoke Monster was a reminder of your insecurities, which often manifested itself as your past mistakes and failures. It seemed to push people to deal with their past issues in order to get better in their current journey. And that is the same way with us. When we start believing the "imposter syndrome" feelings we have, it is important to build in tools to shut it down. I have a cut-glass memory keeper on my bookcase at my office etched with the theme of my first year of Firm leadership (BakerNext) and the phrase "Stones of Remembrance." It was an incredibly difficult and stressful year in trying to turn the financial trajectory of a large organization. Halfway through the year, we were experiencing further negative trends. But with persistence, belief, and hard work, we turned everything around to end the year with positive growth and profitability. Whenever doubt creeps in, and my Smoke Monster rears its head, I look up at the plaque to remind me of the Herculean work we did in 2019 to shut down my own internal questioning voice. What visual reminder can you put in your office to remind you to stay focused, to believe in yourself, and to lead forward with optimism and confidence in where you are heading?

4. The Others

I have learned from negative experiences that showing up with our authentic selves can be hard. It can cause isolation and loneliness. Having moved a lot through the early part of my life, I had challenges navigating new environments, schools, and kids. While I don't think the many moves were the result of my parents being chased by the law, the fact of the matter was that other than the four years living in Guadalajara, Mexico, when I was in grade school, I never spent more than two years in the same school until I arrived at college. Most often, landing in a new home and school, I felt that the closest thing I had to an authentic relationship was with Casey Kasem, the host of the pop music countdown *American Top 40* that I listened to every Saturday morning.

I spent most of my growing-up years feeling like an "Other" from *Lost* in the various places we moved, at least for a while. The mysterious Others were a group of island inhabitants that the castaways came in contact with. The survivors of Oceanic Flight 815 realized that there was a group of strange, apparently unfriendly people living near them on the island. The crash survivors spent their time fixated on avoiding the Others and protecting themselves.

And like the ostracized Others on *Lost*, I often felt the same way during my childhood. I think back to the hardest move, in the middle of my junior year of high school, as I walked through the halls of the latest new school. While I would not categorize myself as mysterious, I was considered a little bit strange when I moved to Southeast Alabama from Corpus Christi, Texas, and wore "surfer" Vans tennis shoes with a checkerboard pattern. And no, I never actually learned how to surf; I just liked the surfer look. I also wouldn't say I was unfriendly, but I did not go out of my way to interact with anyone. I was definitely an Other in every sense of the word – and so people went out of their way to avoid me as an outsider.

I think we all feel like an Other at times. We develop a narrative in our head about how we are not part of the "in crowd" at the office. Or that we get excluded from invitations to lunch with colleagues. Or that our opinion does not matter in important decisions that the company or team is undertaking.

I recently had a good reminder of this during an interaction with an executive team member whom I allowed to feel like an Other (although they did not use that term). We have a high-functioning leadership team comprised of varying talents, perspectives, and opinions. And often we work through some tense discussions and disagreements as we strive to arrive at a course of action that is best for the entire organization. Like the sand irritating the inside of the clam to create a beautiful pearl, our differing views, as we talk through it, get us to a better place. This is how we have operated for the past several years, but it was clear over a period of months that there was increased frustration between us.

Instead of finding the time for the two of us to unpack some of the heightened disagreements, I just chalked it up to the way we got better collectively and moved on. In his mind, however, my failure to address it was because I had lost faith and trust in his ability to lead his area. He began reading things into subsequent actions or comments I made to further his Others narrative, even though the steps I took had nothing to do with our increased tension. It was all a messy expansion of his uncertainty of my trust in him. I only figured this out when I finally reached out to schedule a one-on-one call and talked through it. It helped us get back on track, but not before having to reassess my own actions and realizing I was treating him like an Other, even if I did not intend to do so.

This was an important reminder to me that, as a leader, we must ensure that those I lead do not feel like they are a member of the Others. You have the power to invite them into your world, your space, your castaway beach campfire, and let them glow in the warmth of community. It is so easy to avoid strange, or different, or mysterious people – particularly new people to the company – and stick with the already established group of "survivors." But as an Other at many times in my life, I can attest that people who reached out to welcome me to their tribes are among the individuals who had the most lasting and influential impact on my life.

5. Walkabouts

One of the most intriguing characters on *Lost* was John Locke. He seems like a thoughtful, nondescript character in the first few episodes of Season 1 until it is revealed, in an episode entitled *Walkabout*, that he had been miraculously healed during the plane crash. The producers used a series of flashbacks to *Lost's* main characters' lives before arriving on the island, to build background and depth. During the episode, we learn that a "walkabout" is a rite of passage for young males in the Australian Aboriginal community. It is a journey from adolescence to adulthood where the individual lives in the wilderness for a significant period of time that can run up to six months. There is a spiritual journey component of the ritual.

Locke was not from the Aboriginal society but rather had planned to go on an Australian walkabout as a way to break out of his dead-end job at a box company in the United States. He first hears about the idea from a woman he is "dating" online named "Helen." He determines to quit his job, leave his mundane life at home, and impress Helen by training and planning his mid-life adventure.

When Locke finally makes it to Australia, his walkabout tour guide refuses to let him go. It is finally revealed – the director did a lot of careful camera angles to keep the reveal a surprise – that Locke is in a wheelchair, having been paralyzed from the waist down. The guide believes Locke is too big a liability risk to take him out on the walkabout despite his protestations that it is his "destiny" to complete the walkabout. Notwithstanding, the guide is adamant that they never would have added him to the trip if he had revealed his true condition, and Locke's dream is dashed.

Similarly, it is important for leaders to regularly "walk the halls" among your team or organization. One of the best ways you can sow the seeds of a positive culture is by spending time walking slowly among your colleagues. You can walk the halls if you are in an office setting or walk around your line workers if you lead in a manufacturing setting. As you intentionally interact with those you lead, you gain information on how your colleagues are doing, but you are also building an accessible and collaborative work environment. You will also pick up ideas and insights about how you can help them do their job more efficiently or effectively. Watching how they work to identify glitches in your system, whether technology-related or operational, asking about family members and genuinely caring about the update, and remembering the details so you can follow up the next time you are there.

You must spend routine and intentional time investing in people. Getting to know them, their dreams and ambitions, their challenges, and their ideas. Listening to others as you walk among them will help improve your organization. People want to get to know their leader's authentic self. They want to follow someone they respect. Someone that they know cares about them as part of the company. They will lose focus and the passion to follow you if they never see you in person.

This can be challenging if your workforce is spread across a wide geography, but it is worth the time and effort you put into it. Schedule a Teams call with your business professionals and staff as an open forum. I routinely host "Ask Tim Anything" town hall meetings, whether the questions veer from interest in my family, taste in music, and latest book recommendation, to difficult discussions about a recent change we had to implement. While you cannot be physically in every location all the time, make a concerted effort when you are in a location where you have operations or an office to ensure your accessibility as you walk the halls and interact with your colleagues in that city or plant.

6. Conclusion

One of the important characteristics of great leaders is to remain curious. Always look for ways to grow and get better for your colleagues, whether by reading articles, listening to podcasts, or listening to an audio book. I try to pick a wide range of sources and industries completely distant from the legal profession so I can learn about new ideas, innovations, and projects in areas that have nothing to do with my day-to-day work, but from which I can determine how to apply it to better our systems and approaches in better serving our clients, engaging our colleagues, and impacting our communities. Some of the best leadership ideas I glean often have nothing to do with the legal industry, or even business at all. Much like a 20-year-old television series following the lives of a few dozen people *Lost* from the rest of the world.

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