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Navigating Leadership

Skills and Professional Development





Have you ever thought about the navigator of a ship or plane, and considered how important they are to the successful arrival of that vessel? If we give the crew any thought, we are likely to focus on the captain or pilot — the person ultimately responsible for the vessel. However, it takes an entire crew, with each member fulfilling their own unique responsibilities, for the vessel to arrive safely at its destination — despite any obstacles encountered along the way.

Although the captain is likely the first person we think of, the navigator's role is arguably the most important. And while the traditional navigators we envision guiding ships through treacherous waters may no longer exist, the navigation function (now replaced by GPS) is still of the utmost importance for journeys by land, sea, or life.

According to the *Cambridge English Dictionary*, “navigation is the science or art of conducting ships or vessels from one place to another, including, more especially, the method of determining a ship’s position, course, distance passed over, etc.” To put it another way, “navigation is the process or activity of accurately ascertaining one’s position and planning and following a route.” As we’ll use it here and as it relates to leadership, navigation is the art of determining our current position and charting a course to where we want to go.

In fact, we are constantly mapping out our direction in life. We put together plans for getting into and graduating from college, for saving and buying a house, and for finding and applying for a new job. But somehow identifying a path for progression within our organization doesn’t merit the same kind of attention.

We would never willingly take off on a trip if the captain and crew had not taken the time to chart a course to the desired location. In fact, we rarely choose to deviate from the course of our own daily

activities.

For example, we may not give much thought to our daily commute once we've been doing it for a while, particularly if we take the same route day in and day out. We only question our direction when presented with unexpected roadblocks or hazards — which prompts us to tap into the recesses of our minds, or employ the car's navigation system to select a different route to our destination.

Why don't we do the same things for our lives in general, and then more specifically, for our work-related goals? All too often, we do our jobs, but fail to be intentional about our professional development path or goals for promotion. Then, years into our careers, we start to wonder why we haven't progressed as far as we would have liked. It is possible to get to where we want to go without a plan, but why leave our careers to chance? Instead, we can use the tools of the navigator to proactively plan and navigate the career of our dreams.

These are the four simple steps: (1) determine your current position, (2) chart a course to leadership, (3) follow the plan, and (4) make adjustments, as necessary.

Before we can make a plan or chart a course, we have to identify where we are. For many, this step is the hardest part because it requires a unique level of self-awareness about our qualities, skills, or challenges that can be hard to admit.

Once we've done that, we can chart a course to take us where we want to go. This should be the easiest step; taking action or moving toward our desired goal.

If we've done a good job of planning, implementation is just about following the plan until we reach the end of the journey. Of course, the challenge with this step is that it is rarely easy to move in a straight line — simply as a result of life. There will always be obstacles along our path that will trip us up if we are not constantly paying attention to our direction.

Making course corrections is the final step that will help us stay on track. Knowing that we, like ships battered by waves or planes encountering turbulence, will be moved off our path, we have to be willing to make adjustments to keep us on course.

If we are willing to learn the process of navigating from the navigators who have done it before, we will be able to consistently chart our course to the destinations we desire.

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