



Helping leaders and organizations live up to their promise

In Praise of "Outsiders"

We were on a terrific starboard tack near the southern tip of Madeleine Island - 10 to 15 knots of wind, perfect trim and a beautiful day; I was at the helm. Unfortunately, I was a little too "in the moment," not paying sufficient attention to my chart or to LOON's chartplotter, and assuming that we were sufficiently offshore to miss Grant Point's notorious sand bar. Guess what - we weren't. With a "bump, bump, bump," flapping sails and ceasing of any forward motion, it was obvious that all ten thousand pounds of LOON was aground.

After quickly processing the "denial" stage of our predicament, we tried all the options that I knew of to free LOON - engine full in reverse to back off, all standing to one side, then the other, then astern while attempting to back off, and finally calling for a tow. It was late afternoon on a holiday weekend, and it would take some time for whatever volunteer power boater the marina recruited to reach us. Meanwhile, Greg - a sailing first-timer, wandered around the deck and pointed to a long pole mounted to the cabin's roof. "What's that?" he asked. I explained that it was a "whisker pole" - meant for hiking out our front sail in light winds and something I rarely used. Greg stared at the pole a while longer, then pointed out that it seemed to telescope. "Yup," I replied; "that's so we can adjust it however far we want to hike out the sail" (hoping that sounding knowledgeable about the subject might help make up for my earlier bone-headed move.) "How 'bout if we stretch this thing out all the way and use it to push ourselves off?" Greg said. "Nah," I said, "I don't think that will work; it's a long way down there (about ten feet) and that's not what it's for." "Humoring" him, though, I quickly added: "But what the heck; let's give it a try; we have nothing to lose." Guess what - it worked! With Greg working the whisker pole (now called the "whisker / grounding pole") and me gunning LOON in reverse, we were soon bobbing freely again; I called off the tow and we completed our journey home.

Greg has a few things going for him: He's an independent contractor, so is persistent and doesn't give up easily, and he's a construction guy and designer, so he's a natural problem solver. Most importantly, he was new to sailing - a "non-expert" who didn't know what things are supposed to be so he was able to see what they could be; Greg was an "outsider." Recently I listened to a David Whyte presentation where he talked about the value of "innocence" - not something always to be replaced with experience, but the ability to see things in new ways and important in its own right. We need to cultivate more "innocence" as leaders and to celebrate the perspective of outsiders. "Outsiders" who couldn't or wouldn't understand why something was "impossible" have contributed the bulk of true innovations; they are the ones we will need to look to for solving today's and tomorrow's dicey problems.

- How might you enlist the help of "outsiders" to shed light on a problem or issue?
- What opportunities might you have as an "outsider" to help others see things differently or to resolve a problem?
- How might you help whatever culture you are a part of better leverage the contributions of "outsiders?"

We should use not only all the brains we have, but all that we can borrow.

Woodrow Wilson

The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created them.

Albert Einstein

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