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EFFECTIVE LEADING, AND FOLLOWING

BY ANDY SCHELL



Mike steering with the emergency tiller off Union Island.

Bernard Moitessier once said something to the effect that the captain of a sailing boat has the privilege of sleeping for days when the trades are blowing and the sun is shining...but with that comes the responsibility of standing a 48-hour watch in a winter gale. You do what's necessary.

We were on an overnight passage from Dominica to St. Lucia on a 50-foot sloop. The students on board had learned enough about navigation to ignore the GPS, which was easy because at that point they didn't know it existed. They were steering a course due south, using the Southern Cross as their natural compass.

I was keeping track of their progress on the GPS, without their knowledge, while they dead-reckoned. I started to notice that our track was well east of where they thought we were. And we were getting awfully close to Martinique. I bided my time, and waited to see if anybody would get the picture.

Finally, Mike, one of the younger students, spoke up: "Hey guys, how do we know we are actually on the path we think we are on? It feels like we're too close to that island over there."

Great question, I thought to myself.

It was only Day 10 of a 32-day program, taking us from St. Martin south to Trinidad and everywhere in between. My students, 10 in total, were all high-schoolers, between 16 and 19 years old. Many of them had never set foot on a sailboat before, and none had any real experience in a leadership position.

A debate ensued, and we continued sailing parallel along Martinique's western coast, close enough to see car headlights on shore. Mike scrambled for the hand-bearing compass and managed to take two LOPs from two lighthouses. When he plotted them, it was comically apparent how far off course the boat was. With the help of a few others, Mike plotted a new course to steer, ordered the change, and we eventually made St. Lucia early the next morning.

Once Mike took control of the situation, and realized that I was affording him control by taking a passive stance on the incident, he blossomed. Mike handled the situation perfectly, going through the steps of identifying the problem, brainstorming a solution, and executing the course change. It was picture-perfect leadership, utilizing his skills and the skills of the others around him to get out of what could have been a sticky situation.

The program, organized by Broadreach / Academic Treks (who run adventure programs the world over; see www.gobroadreach.com), was designed specifically to extract this kind of leadership from our students. Each person was assigned specific roles each day, with one person designated "Leader of the Day" to facilitate those roles. The objective of the program was to have the kids 100% in charge of running the boat during the last 10 days, from the actual sailing right on down to budgeting for provisions, clearing customs, and managing activities. My objective was to empower the students enough so that I could relax during those last 10 days.


"Leadership" is an ephemeral quality. What makes a good leader is often difficult to pinpoint. Good leaders seem natural, seem born for it. I believe leadership can be taught, and it starts with good followership.

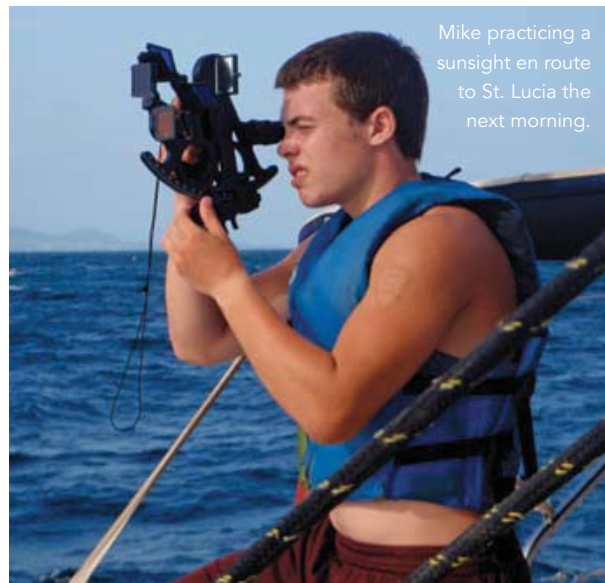
Admittedly, it's difficult to be a good follower when you're "following" a lousy leader. But it's often worthwhile to take a step back and evaluate just why you think you're captain is a bad leader. Is it because you don't like scrubbing stainless all day? Or is he/she legitimately endangering the crew or the boat? And are you, as crew, living up to your expectations as a follower?

The most successful leaders empower their followers into action, whether it's the captain asking the mate to make the next passage plan, or the chef asking the steward to design tomorrow night's meal. During that night sail to St. Lucia, I purposefully stayed out of the way to see what would happen. When Mike realized that I knew what was going on all along and was testing them, he took charge. He wasn't afraid to lead because he wasn't afraid to fail, and he knew I wasn't looking over his shoulder the entire time.

The best leaders on our trip emerged during the final 10 days of the program. The kids were 100% on their own. And they faced their share of adversity.

In the Grenadines, our steering cable sheered. This time, DJ took charge, remembered where the emergency tiller was and managed to sail three miles without the wheel and safely anchor the boat in the lee of Mayreau. That evening, two of the girls, Kathy and Cornelia, dug out the autopilot manual and realized we could make it all the way to Grenada using the autopilot to steer, where we'd find better repair facilities. Tanner, DJ, and Mike found the bus route that would take us to Budget Marine, where they asked the manager for help, described the problem, bought the part (a new master link) and fixed the steering, all independent of a single word of input on my part.

By setting up expectations between captain and crew and empowering everyone involved in the running of a boat, whether it's a 30-foot daysailer or a J-Class yacht, both the captain and crew will be more successful—and happier—in their everyday duties. 



Mike practicing a sunsight en route to St. Lucia the next morning.