

Rock Castle Gorge

John Lubans Jr.

Author's note: This column has appeared since 1999 under the utilitarian rubric "On Managing." As of volume 22, I am changing the heading to "Leading from the Middle." On Managing has served me well, allowing me to write on many management-related topics. Yet, looking back over all the columns and their themes, I keep coming back to a title I used in the fall of 2004, "Leading from the Middle," to introduce the essay, "I'm the boss."¹

Many of my columns are about leading from the middle, about how non-leaders help an organization get better; how followers contribute to effective leadership. Whenever I've taken on a leader's role, I have depended on followers who behaved like leaders in their own right: staff who thought for themselves and whose vision aligned with mine. My best days were when a colleague dropped by my office to tell me, "I've been thinking . . ." and then elaborated on an idea for improvement. Not all ideas were implemented. Many were. Those that were not adopted often led to better ways because their suggestion opened the door to rethinking what we were doing and why. It all started with "I've been thinking . . ."

And, I often write about leaders. When I do, I always focus on whether they liberate followers. Do they encourage and support the good ideas of their staff to permit them to lead from the middle?

So, in this column's ninth year, Leading from the Middle is the new rubric, one that epitomizes my personal leadership philosophy as reflected in my writing.

Rock Castle Gorge

I have three stories to tell you, three threads to weave together.

In May 2007 I was flabbergasted to learn that I had been without health insurance for a year. Adding to my dismay was the bureaucratic fact that I would not qualify for Medicare Part B until the middle of 2008. So, unnervingly,



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no insurance for another year. A year of living dangerously, or so it seemed. My *free* eye exam was now more than \$300 dollars. What if I got really sick?

Life does go on. Once over the kicked-by-a-horse feeling in my stomach, I made several phone calls to Social Security and my former employer who had insured me for more than twenty-five years. Their response: "Sorry, we can't do anything. You are at fault. Expect to pay big penalties, etc." Both agencies said I could appeal their decision, so, I faxed in the appeals asking for a reconsideration of what was, demonstrably, a series of mutual misunderstandings.

Once the dust settled, I began to mull over my situation and my vulnerability. While health insurance and other benefits have become an integral reason for us to work, they are a relatively recent phenomenon. The nonprofit Blue Cross and Blue Shield dates back to the early 1930s. After World War II, health insurance became a must-have as healthcare costs skyrocketed. Now more than 25 percent of our salary package is benefits, with a big chunk going to healthcare. Is this why we work—to assure and to protect our lifestyle? What is the price for our security?

There is a personal cost. Our need for security may draw us only to jobs with benefits. And we may stay in a job long past the time to try something new. When a hospital stay could bankrupt most of us, we are not eager to be in-between jobs, even if we hate the job we're in. Instead we hunker down, keep a low profile, and hope for a change in the leadership rather than take on more risk. If we think for ourselves, and have contrarian thoughts to the organization's conventional thinking, we'll hold back. It's almost as if some bad managers count on this self-restraint and in some intuitive way gauge just how far they can push around a security-seeking staff.

A cringe-worthy ad recently came to me in the mail. It was from a mega insurer and somewhat confirmed my views about how crucial benefits had become:

"Life is good. Let's keep it that way."

We can help: Medicare supplement, final expense, fixed annuities, individual and temporary health insurance, dental coverage, Medicare advantage health plans, Medicare Part D prescription drug plans.

“Be sure you have the coverage you need to protect your lifestyle and your family’s future.”

The ad assumes much: Our lifestyle, our future, depends on “coverage.” Does it?

I readily identified with the ad. At the same time, I was aware of the ad’s manipulation, of its playing on my exaggerated insecurities. And I wondered just how much I had allowed myself to equate “coverage” with happiness? Right about then—perhaps my unconscious mind was casting about for a calming thought—Rock Castle Gorge popped into my head.

I’ve hiked the Gorge twice, each time in winter. The Rock Castle Gorge trail is an isolated 10.8-mile loop off the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia. The Gorge trail peaks at 3,577 feet, and drops, panoramically, to a low of 1,700 feet—the floor of the Gorge. When it’s snowing and blowing up on the Blue Ridge Parkway, it’s likely there is icy rain in the Gorge. When it’s too hot to budge from your rocking chair overlooking the Parkway, it’s a blessed 70 degrees down below.

The Gorge itself, carved out over the eons by Rock Castle Creek, is about five miles long, and follows the creek, its rapids and waterfalls. The Gorge is wide enough in places for cultivation, a water-driven mill, and orchards. Farm families lived along the trail—then a rough and narrow farm-to-market road—that crisscrosses the creek for the five-mile stretch.

Trekking on that rough road, I marvel at those people. I can hear their voices in the rushing creek. I can imagine the children playing among the trees, staying up late on summer nights, leafing through the Sears Roebuck catalog the days before Christmas.

The Park Service says people lived in the Gorge from the late 1700s to the 1930s. Around 1910 some seventy families farmed in the Gorge. In the 1930s all but one of the families sold their land—with no threat of condemnation—to the developers of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Evidence of home sites, of what once was, exists along the trail (see photo 1).

Those seventy families lived out their lives—as best they could—without Social Security, Medicare Parts A, B, and D, Medicaid, or the “Good Hands” insurance people. Nor did they have home insurance, car insurance, boat insurance, or coverage for personal liability, personal property, and “loss of use.” Since they obviously lived in a flood plain they would not have qualified for flood insurance!

Was their life then a perpetual state of anxiety? A life lived in constant fear and jeopardy? Not exactly.

While the Gorge community had none of our contemporary buffers against uncertainty and potential disasters, the families lived happily at times. One Web site entry describes in nostalgic terms what it was like for children:

Gatherings at the Bear (or Bare) Rocks, a large tumble of huge boulders that thrust out of the mountains, included picnics for the entire com-



Photo 1. Standing tall: A lone chimney (used with permission, Gordon Caudle, 2006).

munity, singing, exploring of caves and a little courting while children scrambled over stones and into crevices with *an abandon unknown in today’s world.*² (emphasis added)

No, I am not suggesting we all hike into the wilderness and get a simple life. Nor am I suggesting a return to agrarian times.

I am suggesting that we reflect on the price we pay for comfort, for certainty. Worse, we may harm ourselves when we stay in a dead-end job.

We may even wind up in something akin to the creepy corporate world found in George Saunders novella, *Pastoralia*.³ Hardly pastoral, Saunders take us into a dysfunctional theme park with sly intimations of modern corporate life. The story is narrated by one of the two inhabitants of a cave diorama. The two catch bugs, paint pictographs, and grunt cave talk. When management is happy, the cave couple gets to eat the meat they’ve been grilling over their fire. If the boss is not happy, and this happens capriciously, plastic radishes and a pre-drilled (for the spit) plastic goat are all that slide through the Food Slot.

At the end of each day, there’s a Daily Partner Performance Evaluation (DPPE) form for the cave couple to rate each other and to fax in the answers to these questions:

- Did I have any attitudinal difficulties?
- How do I rate my partner overall?
- Are there any situations which require mediation?

Our protagonist tries to do a good job; he consciously abides by the corporate mantra: “Thinking positive/Saying positive.” He does not speak English in front of the few customers peering into the cave. He does not talk trash at them. He does his best to imitate what cave people would do. Jane, his counterpart, speaks English, occasionally curses the few customers, smokes, and calls in sick. She’s a screw-up.

The boss urges—in new-age consultant talk—the protagonist to give Jane a bad evaluation so they can fire her. Apparently without his cooperation they cannot move against her. He resists, inexplicably loyal, calling her a friend. He himself has a dysfunctional family, a wife who faxes him about out-of-control credit card bills and of their dreadfully ill child. Cavemate Jane’s son is a drug user and a parasite on his mother. If she loses this job, she lets the narrator know, she will have to go care for a dysfunctional parent—that’s all that’s left for her. The narrator, until the very end, gives Jane undeserved good ratings on each of the DPPE forms he faxes in every night. There’s another appraisal tool, the Client Vignette Evaluation (CVE), to be completed by customers.

Both the DPPE and the CVE correspond to real evaluation systems, including those to be found in libraries. In this bizarre theme park, the DPPE and CVE take on an ominous quality, revealed as the tools management uses to discipline and terminate workers, to circumscribe personal freedom. While we like to think our performance appraisals are not fear inducing and controlling, we should understand they are indeed systems to hold people accountable. Most managers trust all but a few staff to do the right thing, yet we have designed an appraisal structure that applies to 100 percent of the workforce. Strangely enough, in my experience I’ve observed exponential growth in performance appraisal structures for libraries. If a three-page evaluation does not quite work as well as it might, we do not reconsider why we evaluate; instead we make the evaluation form into a six-pager. What dreadful things do we fear might happen if performance appraisal was a blank sheet of paper or a long conversation between leader and follower?

Pastoralia puts a price to dependency. The narrator does not think of leaving. He accommodates. He keeps his

mouth shut. He does not stand up to his goofy boss. He suffers, he endures. He is trapped with no exit. Why? We do not know.

Resolution

Several weeks after my insurance appeal, my former employer agreed, without explanation, to provide me with an insurance “bridge” to mid-2008. That’s a relief, because in round one of what may evolve into an epic struggle Social Security lost my paperwork. In round two they denied the appeal, without comment. In round three, I have yet to get a response to my month-old personal letter to the assistant regional commissioner of processing center operations.

So, I am back in the cozy fold of the insured—at least for a year. Yet, I’d already realized that while coverage is nice to have, its absence is most akin to a pothole in the road of life. I really don’t have much of a choice but to accept the calculated risks that come with living and carry on.

Benefits have little to do with the “good life” regardless of what insurance companies want us to believe. If you had to choose between the extremes of *Pastoralia* or Rock Castle Gorge, which would it be? “Safe and sorry” or “insecure and living life”?

Pastoralia is the stuff of nightmares yet most of us know real work places, and maybe a library or two, that are just as dysfunctional. These are places to leave in a hurry. Staying on for benefits only enables the disablers and delays your having a life of your own choosing.

References

1. John Lubans Jr., “Leading From the Middle,” *Library Administration & Management* 18, no. 4 (Fall 2004).
2. Leslie Shelor, “A Typical Mountain Woman,” *Blue Ridge Gazette* (Feb. 27, 2006), http://blueridgegazette.blogspot.com/2006_02_01_archive.html (accessed Sept. 2, 2007).
3. George Saunders, *Pastoralia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000).