

IMMERSE

A JOURNAL OF FAITH, LIFE AND YOUTH MINISTRY

January/February 2011





LEADERSHIP

LIGHTHOUSES AND SIRENS

SETTING GOALS THAT ARE BRAVE, COURAGEOUS AND HEALTHY

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"Wanted: Men for hazardous journey. Low wages. Bitter cold. Long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in the event of success."

-Job Posting, London Times

The more I've led and trained people, the more I see the direction of people's lives and of major organizations heading toward what I call siren goals or lighthouse goals. And the two are remarkably different.

The great turn-of-the century explorer Ernest Shackleton had a clear vision for what he was asking of the men who applied for his journey. He knew an expedition with the goal to be the first humans to traverse Antarctica by way of the South Pole would be difficult, and he wanted applicants who understood the danger.

The year was 1912, and Shackleton was already famous for taking great risks and was known for his leadership. Men flocked to join him, and the expedition left England for Antarctica on the ship called *Endurance*. The eyes of the world were on this team, and Shackleton knew failure was not an option. All his life's work had led up to this goal, and nothing would stand in his way. Singular purpose, determination and belief were aligned.

Twelve months later, Shackleton and his men were trapped on the *Endurance*, caught up in the frozen ocean with the pressure from the ice flow slowly crushing the ship. Ernest had to make the decision to try and finish the original goal or to save their lives.

Ernest would later write that making the decision to abandon the first goal was one of the most difficult choices of his life. He was emotionally, financially and physically tied to the arctic crossing, and now the *Endurance* lay in ruins. His men, supplies and two small lifeboats were all that remained on the crushing ice flow, a thousand miles from rescue. Ernest announced to his men that the original goal was no longer an option and that they would now be heading home.

On the final leg of the rescue, Ernest and five of his crew traveled 680 miles across frigid ocean to complete the journey to a whaling camp on South Georgia Island. Several days later, the rest of his 28 crew members were rescued from Elephant Island. The whole ordeal lasted more than two years, and not one

man was lost, even though they had battled frostbite, delusions and lost hope.

By every crew member's account, Shackleton never lost sight of the goal. Even as the crew faced insurmountable obstacles, Shackleton continued to modify his goals and make bold decisions that kept the crew on course. Shackleton's example is simply amazing. The journey, trying as it was, is clearly an example of great leadership in the face of great peril.

I've led numerous leaders in my role at Life Time Fitness, and I've watched good leaders struggle with two completely different kinds of goals. The more I've led and trained people, the more I see the direction of people's lives and of major organizations heading toward what I call siren goals or lighthouse goals. And the two are remarkably different.

Siren Goals

In Greek mythology, the siren is a beautiful water nymph who sings a captivating song with an allure no man can ignore. In fact, the siren positions herself in shallow water against the rocks of an island, and, when lured there, the ship wrecks, and the sailor is thrown into the water. The siren has the *intent* to ruin those who hear her song.

A siren goal works in the same way. A siren goal is an emotion-based goal that causes you to miss opportunities and eventually can lead to ruin. Setting goals is important, but more important still is setting goals that play to our strengths.

We create siren goals when we:

- 1 Lose all reason and follow emotion and ego. Following these causes us to set goals that are too easy to reach or not challenging enough because we want to feel successful; yet we risk limiting ourselves and our team's full potential.

- 2 Want something so bad that we are unwilling to be objective. This kind of limited perspective drives us to create a goal that is unattainable or dangerous.

The leader who sets a siren goal does not clearly listen to advice from others. The most dangerous part of a siren goal is that the goal itself hinders you from seeing and reaching for other goals that would move you forward.

These goals put leaders at serious risk. When we choose to follow the siren goal, the other goals we set for our teams will also lack focus. Like Shackleton, there will be times when we must lead our crew from island to island, making rapid corrections along the way because of unforeseen circumstances. In those moments, siren goals lead us to make bad decisions and create ineffective leadership.

I have a friend who, in his younger years, was a great athlete. His goal was to go professional. It was a reasonable goal and within his reach. This young guy was drafted into major-league baseball and progressed through the appropriate divisions and training with success. In that process, however, he developed a significantly negative and selfish attitude, and finally, through many injuries, his body gave out, and he could not compete.

In spite of that, he did not give up his goal, and his emotional desire to be a pro remained. He didn't have the ability to look at himself objectively, let go of his old goal and set a new one. As a result, his life went into a tailspin that brought divorce and financial crisis, both of which took years for him to overcome.

My friend lost himself in the pursuit of an old vision. He never took time to modify the vision. He could not see that his reality had changed. He needed to give himself permission to mourn and end one goal and set his course onto another. He had become addicted to the turmoil of the water around his siren goal and often shunned the calm water of a safe harbor. Eventually, after a great soul-searching time, this young guy was able to re-order himself and set new, realistic goals. He did this through becoming brutally objective about himself and his skills; reading and becoming aware of new ways

to think; connecting with trusted people who supported him; and pointing his ship in a new direction.

Siren goals feel like a call into safety, but they're really a call to ruin. If you are concerned that you are living under a siren goal, ask yourself these navigational questions:

- 1 Do I feel directed to change my personal goals?
- 2 Am I following these inner directions?
- 3 Do I get enraged or intolerant when a trusted advisor gives feedback that my goal needs to change?
- 4 Do those closest to me see my skills and gifts differently than I do?
- 5 Do my personal goals align with my God-given gifts and skills, or are they based on what I want my skills to be?
- 6 Has something changed significantly in my life that I know has impacted my ability to accomplish a goal?

If you answer "yes" to any of those questions, you may need to sit down with someone you trust and break through to a new perspective. In the ancient Greek stories, sailors can only hope to escape the siren song and their own ruin by tying themselves to the mast of their ship, plugging their ears with wax and turning their heads away. Turning away from an old goal will face you in a new direction and toward new opportunities. As leaders, we must remember that our goals touch more than ourselves. We are leading others, and our decisions deeply impact those around us.

Lighthouse Goals

In ancient times around the Mediterranean, sailing was a significant way for people to travel and ship goods. A well-known landmark in that era was the Lighthouse of Alexandria, in Egypt. Considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, this lighthouse stood more than 400 feet high, and its light was said to be seen 35 miles out to sea. This was a true wonder and created safety for sailors looking for guidance into the harbor.

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from trusted resources; evaluating and understanding your strengths, skills and desires; then practicing those traits with hard work and concentration long enough that the objective for your life is clear and obtainable.

I once had an employee sit down at her annual review to lay out her plan for the following year. As we ate lunch, she evaluated what she had done the previous year, outlining her success yet not overstating what had been accomplished. As she moved into reviewing her objectives for the following year, I was impressed by her objectivity and her development plan. She set up tough goals, asking for support from me. After making some suggestions on her development plan, I agreed with her objectives. She then told me her lighthouse goal: “By the end of next year, I want to be the manager of the team I currently work with.”

Not only did I support her lighthouse goal, I worked diligently with her all year to navigate her as she built and practiced new skills. She reached that goal and has now set a new lighthouse goal in her career.

When building a lighthouse goal, keep these questions in mind:

- 1 Do I have a trusted person with whom I can brainstorm my vision and goals?
- 2 Do I have a baseline to measure from to gauge my success in reaching my goal?
- 3 Do I use clear, objective understanding of my gifts when setting goals?
- 4 Do I know how to set Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely (SMART) goals?

- 5 Do I get excited when I think about and review my goals?

Lighthouse goals are sometimes not as exciting in the short term as the chaos of siren goals. In fact, lighthouse goals can feel boring. However, strong, healthy, focused goals are good professionally and personally. Just like sailors in ancient times followed the Lighthouse of Alexandria as a guide, those around you will do the same. Our goals ripple out and impact others in extraordinary ways. In the end, the mantle of leadership demands objectivity, candor and clarity while setting goals that lead us into a compelling vision for the future.

Shackleton finally made it home without losing one of his crew, a truly heroic feat. Ernest Shackleton and his crew had to change their goals, and in the end, the expedition delivered on the promise of “honor and recognition.” When they all arrived home, the men were hailed as heroes for their remarkable journey.

A leader with selfless commitment to the crew and the ability to set lighthouse goals personally will shine the light, and all who follow the beacon will be better for it. Lighthouse goals, in good times and bad, will mark leaders in the history books for their follies or for their good fortunes and, in the end, will set a course to lead long term because people will follow no matter how dire the job posting.

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