

# Leading at MACH 2 (Excerpt) Steve Sullivan

## **A Leap of Faith**

The alert came, no differently than it had on twenty six previous occasions. When the jumpmaster held up his hand, I knew exactly how much time remained. It would start with a series of jump commands, and end with me hanging 1,200 feet in the air.

GET READY initiated the action of boots stomping on metal flooring. In the dimly lit belly of a C-130 transport plane, the action had a specific purpose. It brought one from a state of reflective contemplation to piercing mental acuity. Gone were thoughts of anything that transcended present time and place. I was awake!

Looking around I couldn't help but be impacted by what I saw. Sitting in the cargo bay, enshrouded by the reddish luminescence of the interior lights, sat forty individuals who were about to put their life in jeopardy. Thunderous engines, 152 MPH winds, and the frigid night air that characterized the environment outside the plane were in stark contrast to the quiet efficiency going on within.

On this jump, there were lots of reasons to be afraid: mountainous terrain, a water hazard, marginal wind conditions, and a short drop zone. On the other hand, I'd been properly trained, had twenty-six previous successes, and had a bunch of great guys behind me.

STAND UP came next. Without hesitation, we rose in unison. A 180 degree turn and we were ready for the next command.

HOOK UP meant the time had come to secure the static line to guide wire.

CHECK STATIC LINE mandated I inspect the cord that served as my lifeline.

CHECK EQUIPMENT insured the eighty pounds of sundries I carried had been properly secured. I waited to receive the final two commands. The first came when the warning light, next to the jump door, illuminated red.

STAND IN THE DOOR dictated there would be no turning back. In sixty seconds, I would be on my way.

GO ordered the stampede to begin. Without hesitation, I dove into blackness.

Over the years, I've reflected back on that night jump many times. Sitting in a bar telling war stories, I always highlighted the backbone needed to take that first big step. It's not that I like lying, I just

took an oath when I graduated from jump school that I wouldn't tell the truth in public. Everyone who is Airborne knows if you exaggerate the level of bravery it takes to exit an airplane, by association you will come across as a very intrepid individual. People buy drinks for guys with guts.

Relaxing in the privacy of my home, I'll be more candid. If someone asks what part courage played in getting out the door, I've had to admit, none! Courage is the ability to overcome fear. There was no fear involved. The confidence that exists as a result of a paratrooper's preparation is so great, there is no room for fear. But, as important as confidence is in getting someone to accept a challenge, it pales in comparison to the energizing effect of trust.

Confidence got me in the plane, trust got me out of it. I trusted the riggers who packed my chute, the pathfinders that marked the drop zone, the jumpmaster who issued the commands, and the pilot that got us in position. Trust enabled me to put my life in someone else's hands, and when I did, I had no reservations.

## **Trust**

In my life I have found nothing of greater worth! It is the glue that binds husband to wife, father to daughter, teacher to student, and leader to follower. Feelings of trust underlie the Magna Carta, the Constitution of The United States and the Bill of Rights. Without Trust there would be no monetary system. Trust enabled David to challenge Goliath, Lindbergh to assault the Atlantic, and six hundred to ride into the valley of death.

I hold trust in such high esteem I will not diminish it with a definition. Trust is not about words. Its genesis is the result of deeds. Whether they be small and insignificant or big and brazen, when you communicate to those you lead, "I am doing my best on your behalf," it is only a matter of time until trust takes you to new heights.

Trust me! Do yourself a favor and never make the request. Because individuals have been known to give their life for someone they trust, they'd rather you not ask for it. They want you to earn it through consistent, credible behavior over time.

I know a lot of people who still don't fathom how trust is built. On any given day, they are magnificent in their ability to measure up. Without hesitation, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, they can be trusted. The other four days are a different matter. Tuesday they cave in to pressure, Thursday greed, Saturday laziness, and Sunday, they just don't give a damn. Tomorrow they'll be back on track.

What they don't understand, is trust doesn't evolve when someone is the object of a psychological roller-coaster. Hot and cold, wet and dry, in and out, and on and off does not exemplify the kind of behavior people grow to trust. As it should be, you are not entitled to be trusted until you have proven yourself over a number of cycles.

I've been told by some I've led, they would follow me, if not to the gates of hell, at least to the outskirts of Newark. If they do, it is only because I have gained their trust. Through thick or thin, good or bad, balmy or bleak, I'm proud to claim I am consistent in my behavior when leading others. I have not and will not succumb to anything that would betray the trust they have placed in my leadership. To do so would violate the sanctity of the relationship, and undermine a fundamental tenet: Leaders can be trusted.

To tell you building trust is easy would be a misrepresentation of the facts. It requires diligence, courage, foresight and a never-ending commitment to the welfare of your team. But because of its

bipartisan nature, when you have proven to them you can be trusted, you may rightfully assume, they can be trusted.

Early on I used to ask people what I had to give to earn their trust. I no longer pose the question. After two decades of answers, I finally figured it out. While there are variations on the theme, by and large, when three ingredients are present, the recipe for trust is complete. Not surprisingly they want the same things as you and I: Respect, Support, and Reward.

## **Respect**

Songs have been sung about it, people killed for it and empires built on it. I've never met anyone that didn't want Respect. Given its unchallenged importance in our lives, why is it absent in so many organizations? It's not as if respect is some abstruse entity. Ask a corporate executive or a tenth-grade drug-dealing dropout to define respect, and I'll wager their answers will be similar.

While the dictionary provides a number of definitions, their synthesis centers on three words. There it is again, The Golden Rule. If you have some questions on the issue, pull up the Universal Energy Chart. Everything listed under Combustion exhibits respect, while each behavioral act beneath Contamination communicates an opposite message.

A while back we established that leaders are in the business of accommodating followers' needs. It seems logical, if people require respect, it would be in your best interest to give it. If you are thinking they need to earn it, you're right. I think, if they are doing enough to still be on your team, they have.

## **Support**

It manifests itself in different ways: emotional, financial, personal or educational. When you entreat someone to raise their MAPP, you are asking them to do more. It seems reasonable if they need a little assistance you should give it.

Making people smarter might mean they may have to go back to school. Greater responsiveness could require a hard-to-come-by capital appropriation. I'll be the first to admit when I'm getting ready to leave the office after a long day and face a two hour commute, I have no desire to be delayed. When Marilyn comes up and says I need to talk to you, I would like to say "later." If I did, I'd be betraying a trust. Leadership isn't about convenience. If you didn't know it, you have an obligation to serve. They trust you'll be there when they need you. Not every request someone makes is going to be easy to accommodate, but whatever investment you make up front will be returned in myriad ways when their actions proclaim, "thanks for the support."

## **Reward**

Recently, sitting at a dinner table with a number of executives the subject of leadership came up. As various individuals discussed their feelings on the issue, one participant mentioned how she rewarded performance. When she concluded, another sarcastically retorted, "I reward performance every two weeks with a paycheck."

I knew nothing about the antagonist so I couldn't tell whether he was trying to be controversial or actually believed that paying a salary fulfilled his leadership responsibility. If you aren't aware of it, salaries are for doing your job. Rewards are a way of thanking someone for the risk they take, in getting to a higher MAPP.

I'll be the first to admit, there are people that don't see it my way. Frequently, when the issue of

Rewarding performance comes up, the conversation gets pretty heated. Because most organizations have limited resources, not everyone will receive what they think is appropriate. I'm not going to get into a who, what, when, where, why and how discussion, because rewarding performance has much to do with circumstance and environment.

I will say that anyone who is part of a team deserves to be rewarded, in direct relationship to their contribution. When I talk reward I don't necessarily mean monetary compensation. Certainly it is one kind of reward, but experts on the subject have proven that financial rewards are highly overrated.

I define a reward as: anything that makes a statement that you appreciate a person's effort. Rewards come in countless ways. Some are tangible: a pool table in the lunchroom, a pizza party, a plaque on the wall or a promotion. Many are intangible: exposure, latitude responsibility, autonomy, authority, or time off to attend a funeral.

Because any reward's value rests in the eyes of the recipient, it not unreasonable to expect if you reward blindly, you may miss the target. Don't be afraid to ask people what they would like as their reward. You may find out it's not an ashtray with the corporate logo.

Earlier I stated, if people were Respected, Supported and Rewarded properly, you would have the necessary ingredients to build Trust. I'll stand on that statement, but I need to modify it. Because we live in a world where individual's are constantly measuring themselves against others, our recipe for Trust is incomplete until we add a measure of fairness. As with success, it lies in the eyes of the beholder. But, unlike success, it is not an energizing agent. Because it is understood fairness is to exist in any leader/follower relationship, when it does you have only done what is expected.

On the other hand, when it's absent, you have a potentially incapacitating problem. If you are looking for others to pledge allegiance to your flag, ensuring everyone is treated fairly becomes a mandate. I think fairness is a word we should define.

## FAIRNESS

- Just and honest.
- According to the rules.
- Adherence to a standard of rightness.

There doesn't appear to be anything cryptic in the definition. Even so, when it comes to fairness, many a leader has gotten into trouble. This is not because they weren't predisposed to being fair, but had more to do with understanding its convoluted nature.

While much about fairness has to do with here and now, substantially more focuses on past and future. When legislating fairness, absolutism does not exist. Fairness is about relativity. It patrols the organization in search of associational interplay. Frank couldn't have been happier about his new office, until he found out it was twenty square feet smaller than the one they gave to Charlotte.

If you are thinking it's difficult to identify a fairness issue, I will tell you it isn't. Just ask yourself this question. Would I want it to happen to me.?