



An Ode to George (and Other Monumental Mammals)

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Introduction

For many years, I have joked with clients that some of my best leadership lessons emanate from the animal kingdom. At a bare minimum the quip rejuvenates focus during a protracted meeting. For example, I note the change-management analogy inherent in herding cattle. Cowboys know that getting the most mature cow pointed in the right direction correlates highly with the rest of the herd following suit. Ponder the cow's change-agency as an early adopter from Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations curve. Another bovine barb regards wind direction. A cattle herd tends to graze in the same direction as the blowing wind. Consider this analogous to non-verbal cues that EQ-savvy leaders should observe.

This value-creation installment draws from my dog, George, who passed into doggy heaven in mid-June of this year. George's life lends a treasure trove for those pursuing the most elusive, yet impactful, value-creation algorithm: culture. M3 defines the scope of culture as all things people—what motivates them to steward the business model in pursuit of competitive objectives.

Pedigree

"Dogs are wise. They crawl away into a quiet corner and lick their wounds and do not rejoin the world until they are whole once more." — Agatha Christie

Our household is ripe with rescue people. My better half and our two daughters have found homes for rescue dogs from coast to coast. The joke in our home for years is who has joined the family upon my return from a week on the road—or at least checked in on a layover amid the canine underground rescue railroad. At times, our house could have been rezoned as a kennel. Even with the volume discounts we receive from our wonderful neighborhood veterinarian, our vet bills probably funded their expansion. The veterinary network extended to specialists who did surgeries and emergency house calls.

Yuval Noah Harari imparts in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* that dogs are the oldest domesticated species in the animal kingdom. The evolutionary story may be a bit deeper and more complex, especially in terms of human behavioral development. Dogs have protected the family, shepherded the livestock, and provided companionship for millennia. Former President Harry Truman is alleged to have observed that a dog was the only option for a true friend in the perpetually distempered Washington, D.C. Why would this be? Perhaps the answer is that dogs are the closest thing to unconditional love that mankind will find among his mammalian neighbors. Is it a mere coincidence that the Almighty's name spelled backwards is mankind's best friend?

This brings me to George. Ahead of our introduction to George, he was found abandoned inside a box in a roadside ditch, mouth taped shut, throat cut, malnourished, dehydrated, injured, and sick. His rescuer got him to a "no kill" shelter whose caregivers quickly deduced that George had been a fighting ring's bait dog who had extinguished his "useful life." Dog fighting is a disgusting, yet prevalent, activity in many regions of the country. Among the corroborating evidence of George's "vocation" was that his teeth had been filed away and he was more scarred than a war zone, replete with abundant evidence of broken bones which had not been set. George's asymmetric musculature was further aggravated by purposefully being confined to an apparently cramped space to induce muscular atrophy and make him weaker for purposes of "doing his bait dog job." His heart was not even positioned correctly in his chest. Among the mysteries surrounding George was why his cruel "owners" had not exterminated him instead of inflicting more harm and insult by abandonment in a scenario by which he could have died from starvation, exposure, and/or drowning. George's initial discovery by rescuers had paroled him from the equivalent of the Vietnam War era Hanoi Hilton.

George quickly responded to humane treatment and nutrition to rebound from his skeletal 35 pounds to a more reasonable 60 pounds. Our family entered the picture when George had exhausted his "no kill" network options. A rescuer acquaintance asked us to foster care George pending a permanent solution. When my wife arrived at the shelter to meet George, she was briefed on his history and appropriately cautioned about the possibility of unknown aggressive triggers, somewhat analogous to post-traumatic stress disorder. However, George sensed he was in the presence of "the dog whisperer." When my wife opened the passenger door of her vehicle, George scampered upon the passenger seat, curled up, and promptly went to sleep. As it turns out, our family was George's permanent solution and we adopted him. Proper care propelled George to his homeostatic 80 pounds on a frame that looked like a collegiate wrestler. George was solid, sinewy muscle that belied his sincerely sweet disposition.

George seldom barked. He personified continual gratitude for food, shelter, healthcare, and love. And George returned the love in multiples. George regularly accompanied my five-mile power walks, took dips in the creek running beside the community park, and binge-watched college football on weekends. He loved to ride and was a wonderful traveling companion. Everyone who cared for him in the veterinary offices knew and loved George. He was a VIP who they enabled to roam freely in their offices when we reluctantly had to board him for trips.

George's age was a mystery. We guessed him to be about six when he joined our family. In the ensuing five, we hope we displaced his pain with joy. A couple of years back, George became uncharacteristically distended. Our family veterinarian diagnosed a spleen just ahead of rupture. As he was recovering from surgery, George suddenly deteriorated rapidly. An astute urgent care veterinarian suspected babesia, a serious infection common to fighting pit bulls. Basic blood test panels do not detect babesia. Perhaps babesia was the root cause of his damaged spleen. George recovered in a few months thanks to a regimen of potent antibiotics, and we thought we had achieved an even keel. Unfortunately, George then developed cancer. He endured chemo and radiation. Again, he rallied. Just as we thought he was back to his puppy-like energy, his cancer aggressively returned.

George was intrepid and fought the good fight, but when the outcome was obvious, George knowingly looked in my wife's eyes to communicate that it was time and he was ready. We were with George at the end. I have not cried so hard since writhing in agony for hours from a broken clavicle at age four. The emptiness is vast. The silence of George's absence is deafening.

Humans in George's Model

"Dogs love their friends and bite their enemies, quite unlike people, who are incapable of pure love and always have to mix love and hate." — Sigmund Freud

I reflect on George through a human prism. He had every excuse to be a victim. Instead, George chose happiness. His glass was always at least half-full. George's credo drew from a verse from Sheryl Crow's song, "Soak Up the Sun:" "It's not having what you want, it's wanting what you've got." Amid my grief at George's demise, I was reminded of people who similarly inspired me. The icon of that group was my step grandfather. How he became my step grandfather is an interesting story.

Before he became my step grandfather, he was a widower of many years. His predecessor, my "blood" grandfather, was a reserved figure of few words. Circa 1960, a

non sequitur crossed his lips to my grandmother: “If something ever happens to me, I hope you remarry a man of impeccable character—someone like ‘him’ (my yet-to-be step grandfather).” Not long afterward, my “blood” grandfather died of a stroke. Seven years after his death, his prophetic statement came true when my grandmother married my step grandfather.

My step grandfather’s character was forged by intrepidity. When my step grandfather was 16 years old, he lost his right arm at the elbow to a skeet shooting accident. This was around the turn of the *last* century. Poor medical treatment led to gangrene before eventual amputation. The mortality rate in that era was much higher from inaccessible medical staples and non-existent procedures. Sterile technique and antibiotics are things that modernity takes for granted.

My step grandfather was righthanded and had to learn how to do everything with his opposite appendage. There was no physical therapy to lean upon. He overcame his handicap by sheer determination. My step grandfather financed his own law education. He raised a large family during the Great Depression. Many of his services were paid by barter, as cash was in short supply. He became the district attorney in our county, as well as mayor of the county seat. My step grandfather’s jovial style was indefatigable. His wit was legendary. He never met a stranger.

My step grandfather was the Pied Piper of kids. He and I were inseparable. He taught me how to tie my shoes and a necktie with one hand. He wielded his customized fishing rod to the envy of neighboring sportsmen and to the chagrin of freshwater bass. An avid gardener, his wheelbarrow had a nylon loop on the right handle through which he would catch his right nub. He had a combination fork and knife that obviated any need of assistance to enjoy a steak. Imagine a left arm circumnavigating a car steering column to reach the ignition. He could type a legal brief (sans typos) with his left hand on a manual typewriter faster than anything I have since witnessed with an autocorrecting word processor. The only thing my step grandfather could not do was clap his hands—but he could slap his thigh in the delight of spontaneous humor.

My step grandfather played harmonica by ear. He cradled a glass in his right half arm to create a primitive reverberation sound. Bob Dylan and Huey Lewis would have been impressed. As I child, I was routinely entertained by my grandmother tickling the keyboard ivories, accompanied by my step grandfather on harmonica. They were young at heart and respectful of my eclectic musical tastes. When the turntable was spinning Elvin Bishop or Stevie Wonder, they would listen once, then play along the second time as though they were part of the band.

My step grandfather's son was his law partner. A drunk driver killed his son, his son's wife, and their oldest child. I happened to be with my grandparents when he received the crushing news amid a family event. His immediate grieving utterance was "Why couldn't it have been me instead?" It was the only sad remark I ever heard him make. In his senior years he became guardian of his son's two surviving children. Both now have their own families and most assuredly appreciate the heavy lifting of the man who was their surrogate dad. My step grandfather made a difference to more people than I would ever be able to tally.

Another in the George model was a lady we knew from our church. She and her husband were missionaries in the Asian theater. When the US entered World War II after Pearl Harbor, her family evaded the Japanese in the Philippine jungles for over a year before their capture, followed by two years of cruelty and deprivation in a POW camp. After the war their family returned as missionaries in 1948. She lost her husband in a plane crash. Widowed with four young children in tow, she came home to the states. In 1961, she returned to Asia for a third tour of duty, this time running a Singaporean hostel for missionary children. In retirement, she was everyone's grandmother—across multiple generations. In the south, we refer to matrons like her as steel magnolias.

The third person in the George model was the best boss in my career. He was a towering man who engineered a familial corporate culture of loyal, industrious employees. His climb to the top of the organization was protracted. He was patient and determined. He never deviated from his commitment to the corporate objective. His values and moral compass always guided him in an ethical direction. He was the best role model I have ever been exposed to in business.

My boss' word was his bond. He would not ask his people to do anything he had not done or would not do. He sought his subordinate's input on big decisions. Even if his decision went another way, he explained himself such that no one felt slighted by his judgment. He knew he had to rely on our support for successful execution. We worked hard. We celebrated success.

My boss deeply cared about his people. He invested his person capital in diversity before diversity was cool. A customer once slighted an employee of color with a racial epithet. Our boss immediately fired the customer and stapled their file shut. The decision was permanent, as was the leadership message. We lived in Dr. King's hometown and we walked the talk about content of character.

I sought his advice on both personal and professional decisions. His discretion was priestly. I still reflect on how he would approach tough decisions. Somehow, I know he is looking over my shoulder and I do not want to let him down.

Benchmarking Optimistic Intrepidity for Corporate Culture

“What counts is not necessarily the size of the dog in the fight; it’s the size of the fight in the dog.” — President Dwight D. Eisenhower

I have met many people in my life who refused to succumb to adversity or compromise their values. Instead, they embraced life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—knowing that justice eventually and inevitably vindicates “doing the right thing.” Frederick Nietzsche explained it this way: “What does not kill me makes me stronger.” What makes these people stronger? Over years of observation, a model evolved which seems to describe such people. Many bestselling authors feature the characteristics shared below, albethey packaged differently.

- They have a clear vision of what they want to accomplish, and guard against short-term indulgence that threatens the endgame. As Americans, we should be cognizant that only a tenth of the global population shares a similar worldview. Whereas Americans tend to think in quarters, some cultures with whom we compete think in centuries.
- Their values are self-evident by their deportment. People tend to place more weight on what you do than what you say. In modern parlance this translates to “walk the talk.” Stephen M.R. Covey explains in *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything* that we judge ourselves by our intentions; whereas, others judge us by our actions.
- Their character is impervious to temptation. Character is what you do when no one else is looking—even when a big price is paid for doing the right thing. We should endeavor to have a price too steep for Satan to buy our souls.
- They are trustworthy. Again, Covey imparted great wisdom in *The Speed of Trust*. He explained that the presence of trust pays dividends just as the absence of trust exacts a tax on corporate culture. Moreover, he argued that trust is like a bank account in which only small deposits may be made, yet we must continually make those deposits in anticipation of a potentially mammoth withdrawal (from the adversely affected stakeholder’s perspective). To wit, if we do not build trust, we cannot expect the benefit of the doubt.
- Their teams are diverse, yet compatible, with the mortar among the infrastructure bricks being shared values and objectives. As the Japanese proverb asserts, all of us are smarter than any of us.
- They embrace meritocracy within their organizations and ethical competition in their markets, convinced that the best ideas are honed by scrutiny. Legendary UCLA men’s basketball coach John Wooden knew his team’s ability to compete on the court required exceptional talent with a good game plan. Coach Wooden also prepared his players for life beyond the court.

- They know that most knowledge has a differentiation half-life; thus, differentiation is fueled by a commitment to lifelong learning. “Sharpening the saw” is one of Stephen R. Covey’s *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.
- They understand that change is inevitable; thus, they do not fear it. Rather, they resolve to interpret change in order to craft a strategy to exploit it.
- They refuse to be defined by failures. Rather, they learn from their setbacks with resolve to reengage with a better plan. Thomas Edison famously explained that he ruled out 10 thousand ways the electric lightbulb would not work before introducing the minimally viable product. Failure is an outcome, not a person. People who have never failed have not tried hard enough to test their potential.
- They are judicious and equitable in their interpersonal dynamics and leadership style. This means that conflict has multiple angles of perspective which they consider in their decision-making process. Among my mentors I learned that facts are irrefutable; however, personal truths are manufactured by selective facts. Another gem is “fair” and “just” are not the same thing. “Fair” is where you take a pig for a ribbon; “justice” is a rules-based argument that leaves an audit trail to invite critique in pursuit of the best “right” decision among options.
- They pay forward their wisdom to the next generation. Mentoring is a popular management practice, yet its origins are ancient. Amid the technology revolution, reverse mentoring has enabled millennials to teach baby boomers how to improve productivity by assimilating technology tools.
- They comprehend why all major religions espouse a version of the Golden Rule and its corollaries: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
- Their legacies are leaving the world in better shape than they found it.

President Teddy Roosevelt encapsulated all these sentiments in his immortal “Man in the Arena:”

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

Making the Talent Pipeline Actionable

“If a dog will not come to you after having looked you in the face, you should go home and examine your conscience.” — President Woodrow Wilson

Supposing the resonance of the cultural model in the previous section, what are leaders doing to attract, inspire and retain requisite talent? Patrick Lencioni admonishes in his allegorical book, *The Ideal Team Player*, that we start by recruiting three characteristics: hunger, humility, and smarts. In complement, The Great Courses' *Critical Business Skills for Success* lecture package imparts that impactful employees are talented, motivated, and supported. How do leaders make this actionable? This poignant point is particularly pugnacious in a full-employment economy.

- Start with a clear, concise vision for corporate aspirations of the unique value proposition. It is not sufficient for leaders to understand this; rather, it is imperative that leaders communicate the vision such that their present and future teammates understand the vision. Simply put, visions only have a chance of becoming reality via providing value to customers—so leaders must connect the dots.
- Next, define the skillsets required to commercialize the vision. Moreover, project the estimated quantities of people with these skillsets concurrent with the growth forecast. Zig Ziglar emphasized attitude over aptitude to achieve altitude. Ziglar's point is well taken. Even so, leaders hedge their bets in their teams with both.
- Develop recruitment channels, i.e., access points for these persons. This is analogous to marketing channels for products and services. Recruitment is more productive when we establish creative marketing channels. This approach is key to finding the scarcest of specialized skillsets.
- Proactively recruit even when there are no present openings. Leaders need eventual future teammates to know about the company in hopes of developing a healthy curiosity about its vision. This is tantamount to marketing communications. Leaders want to attract people who were not necessarily looking for a new career challenge. This is a hedge against settling when the business is jammed by an unexpected vacancy.
- Create and institutionalize steps and tools for a consistent hiring process, including training the hiring managers. (Note: Only one in ten hiring managers is trained in how to interview candidates!)
- Effectively onboard new hires into their position and acculturate them into the corporate family. Absent deliberate steps, this may take up to 18 months. The ecosystem requires quicker results.
- Implement a performance management system that rewards results achieved “the right way.” Performance feedback for the modern workforce must be more dynamic. Productivity and morale depend on this.

- Provide continual training and development programs to hone existing skills and assimilate new ones. The half-life of useful knowledge keeps getting shorter. Continuous learning has both offensive and defensive attributes.

Collectively, the goal is “branding” the company as an “employer of choice.” This translates into a magnet for talented people.

Postscript: Bringing it Back to George

“When the Man waked up he said, ‘What is Wild Dog doing here?’ And the Woman said, ‘His name is not Wild Dog anymore, but the First Friend, because he will be our friend for always and always and always.’” — Rudyard Kipling



I miss my buddy, George. I miss him snoring behind my office chair. I miss his nudging my leg with his head to remind me that too much time had lapsed since last scratching behind his ears.

George was an optimist. He was a survivor and a thriver [sic]. He never complained. He did not dwell on the past and eagerly anticipated the future. He was loyal. He earned my trust, and I hope I earned his.

George was a giver. He reminded me that being there is more meaningful than talking (barking) about being there. I learned as much from him as I have to date from humans. George’s wisdom will be shared among my animal analogies and anecdotes in my

value-creation practice. George’s impact on our family is indelible.

George still stands watch over my office productivity. His urn rests a few feet from my desk with an adorning encapsulation of his legacy: “George, a role model to humans for love, civility, and loyalty.” I aspire to become the person George thought I am.

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