LESSONS IN COHESION

THE PATH OF SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATION

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By any standard the battle was over. Clearly the Greeks were broken as an effective fighting force. Most of the original three hundred original Spartans now lay scattered around the battlefield, dead or dying and perhaps worse, their beloved king, Leonidas I, had just been killed, pierced by Persian spears while bravely leading a failed counter attack against the strength of the enemy line. His death was the final blow that should have ended the day.

Only a small group of Spartans remained, probably not more than seventy, and most of them bore the open wounds from three days of continuous and brutal fighting. Exhausted they struggled up a nearby knoll, each taking turns carrying the now lifeless body of their fallen king. At the top of the low grassy hill they laid Leonidas down and quickly formed a tight, protective circle. Swords drawn, shields held high, and spears pointed defiantly outward the Spartans waited for the inevitable.

In front of them massed the strength of King Xerxes’ Persian army, over one hundred thousand strong. Row upon row they stood, men from all corners of the vast Persian Empire, the Cissians, the Medes, even Greeks from some small northern cities that had decided to join the Persians rather than fight them.
Behind the surviving Spartans, cutting off their only escape route were the Immortals, the best of the Persian army. The Immortals were the professionals, well trained and disciplined. A local herder had betrayed the Greeks by showing the Immortals a small goat path through the mountains, a means to sneak-up behind the now doomed Spartans.

Mounted cavalry slowly circled the low hill in a show of demoralizing force while in the background, ready to lend instant support were the Persian chariots, the heavy armor of ancient warfare. The Spartans were completely surrounded. There was absolutely no hope, and everybody knew it.

The Persians were tired too. Three days of battle had cost them dearly. Over twenty thousand of their best warriors had been lost, including a big chunk of the elite Immortals. In exchange, less than one thousand Greeks lay dead. The Persians had been bloodied but not defeated. Now they stood on victory’s edge.

The tight circle of Spartans waited, but oddly the Persians didn’t attack. It must have been an eerie silence, filled with nervous expectation and concluding thoughts of life and death. The lull would have been punctuated only by the muffled cries of wounded men that lay about the battlefield.

Instead Xerxes sent a messenger to the hill. He offered a carrot, an exchange of life for certain death. Included was only one small condition, a simple trade.

“Give me the body of Leonidas,” Xerxes demanded, “and you can all go free.”
According to Herodotus, the Greek historian who described the battle afterwards, the small circle of Spartans immediately refused. “A Spartan only leaves the field carrying his shield, or upon it,” they shouted back to the Persian messenger.

They simply were not going to abandon their dead king, not for any reason.

Thus their fate was sealed. They were to die upon that grassy hill among their fallen comrades. And in doing so, those few surviving Spartans wrote one of the greatest chapters in the history of cohesion. The story of how three hundred Spartans, together with a small contingent of Thespian and Theban warriors, fought to the last man at Thermopylae and in doing so, literally stopped an army over one hundred times its size in its tracks.

Xerxes was furious at the Spartan’s response to his offer, but he dared not send any more men against the Spartans. His Persian army had grown increasingly scared. After three days of battle they knew that closing with a Spartan was an invitation for an early death. A significant percentage of Xerxes’ army might revolt if pushed any further.

Xerxes had no choice. He had to wait a couple more hours. From the rear, he called in his battalions of archers, and in a continuous hail of arrows, enough it was said to “darken the sky,” the remaining Spartans were put to rest. It was finally over.

Thus begins our study of organizational cohesion, a journey that begins at Thermopylae in 480 BC, and ends in the 21st century corporate boardroom.
Why study cohesion in organizations? What is it this concept? These are reasonable questions to ask. Cohesion, in short, is the glue that binds an organization together. And just as with any adhesive, the better the chemistry the greater the pressure it can withstand. When pushed, the parts of a cohesive organization simply stick together better, and in some cases the bond actually gets stronger.

Cohesion keeps a small start-up company from prematurely collapsing as financial and competitive pressures mount. Cohesion pushes the research firm to the edges of the technological cusp.

In sports, cohesion allows the underdog college basketball team to defeat the national favorite. Cohesion explains why some units of soldiers, firemen, and rescuers charge headfirst into danger; and why some don’t. Ultimately it answers the question why some groups, organizations, and corporations fail miserably when pushed just a little, yet others stand and excel against all odds.

Surprisingly few, if any, management textbooks, really talk about cohesion in organizations. Rather they have chapters about leadership, motivation, and incentives. They describe in detail various models of organization structure and formal planning.

This is all important stuff certainly, but organizational cohesion means putting all of these components together in just that special way. More than anything else, it provides the foundation of superior sustainability. With cohesion victories come easier, and defeats are fewer in between.

Another Greek present at Thermopylae knew this all too well. His name was Demaratus. Demaratus
was a traitor, a dethroned former king of Sparta that had defected to the invading Persians. He became a close friend of Xerxes, his special advisor in military matters as the Persian wave of conquest swept over Asia-minor.

When Xerxes first arrived at Thermopylae he was stunned at the small Greek army blocking his path. And worse, the Greeks didn’t even appear to care about the crushing odds, the thousands upon thousand of Persians warriors now forming in front of them. They calmly and quietly braided their hair, cooked their food, and did their daily calisthenics. They laughed at the Persian horde.

Xerxes camped his army and waited for the Greeks to retreat. The Persians waited and waited, for four long days they waited while the Greeks played and danced in front of them. Frustrated, Xerxes finally called over Demaratus and asked him if the Spartans would actually fight, taking on ten or twenty men each? Shouldn’t they just run back into the hills?

Under his breath, Demaratus must have just chuckled and slowly shook his head. Xerxes just didn’t understand. This thing at Thermopylae was going to be different.

He told his new Persian master that “one-against-one, the Spartans are as good as anyone in the world. But when they fight together, they are the best of all.”

“‘Togetherness,’” this is the essence of cohesion in organizations. In fact, the word cohesion itself comes from a combination of two Latin words, co-, which means “together,” and haerere, which means “to stick.” Thus cohesion is the bond of togetherness, but
togetherness for a purpose. Together, as an organization, they are absolutely the best at what they do.

Cohesion is not an accident of nature, nor is it simply charismatic leadership. King Leonidas, after all, had fallen earlier. For the Greeks the battle was lost. The Persians would sweep the field by the day’s end, this was certain. Yet alone and exhausted, the small circle of Spartans rallied for one last stand at the pass, one final grand effort to delay the Persians and buy a few more hours so the nearby Greek cities could organize a defense.

Cohesion requires a management process, certainly, but the path to a cohesive organization is really more than just a process. Sticky glue also demands the right ingredients and the correct application. Cohesion must be firmly grounded in the intimate understanding of the chemistry of organizational life.

True organizational cohesion is elusive, whether in the profit oriented offices of a modern corporation, the learned halls of universities, or the command headquarters of modern armies. The path is neither easy nor obvious. In fact, it is something that is almost truly historical when actually encountered. As such, cohesion deserves our intense study and deep understanding. Anything less is simply sloppy management practice.

Our study of cohesion will take many directions. First are the great stories of history, those fabulous vignettes of human excellence, organizational endurance, and in some cases, amazing sacrifice. History is a great mentor for the modern world, it
underlines the peaks of human achievement and sharply contrasts it with the valleys of failure. If understood in its proper context, history ruthlessly separates the ridiculous from the truly important.

But history, while rich in meaning and culture, is not empirical science. History, no matter how grand in scope, will always be filtered by the inevitable passage of time, and the biases of those that actually record and interpret the events.

For our modern study of cohesion we need to go beyond and augment our understanding of history with the hard results of scientific research.

This is our second path of insight, the results of scientific investigation. We need to unlock the grand and ever expanding repository of organizational knowledge that is kept in our academic journals and scientific treatises. Yet too often the key seems to have been conveniently misplaced by academics and practicing managers alike.

When one really thinks about it, this is, in fact, exactly the job of our professional schools and universities. Whether in business, law, education, medicine, or engineering, the complex job is twofold; to both create the scientific base that continuously expands our frontiers of knowledge, and to properly transfer this intellectual asset to its particular profession.

Translating scientific work is not an easy task, however. It requires patience and understanding. It involves diligence and experience. And above all, it demands an appreciation that science, particularly the social sciences like management and economics, while sometimes narrow in scope, does help separate
truth from simple hypotheses and propositions. And in the end, our understanding of organizational cohesion will be richer for it.

The real danger lies in not integrating the results of scientific study with the richness of historical insights. One without the other just seems a little incomplete. Without either however, the effort, no matter how sugar coated it is presented, simply becomes a sloppy exercise in idle speculation. Yet the vast majority of leadership and motivation books that fill the aisles of modern book stores seem to be just that.

Science is always defined by the nature of empirical research, and the need to carefully measure and control experiments. Thus science will always study a particular narrow phenomenon to the exclusion of others. This is how science works. Most scientific advances are made in incremental hiccups.

In writing this book, we have examined hundreds of research studies on organizational cohesion, in psychology, management, and military science. Most of this body of work is preoccupied with very small group or team cohesion, and to a large extent has completely ignored medium and larger organizations. And many have focused on military cohesion, to the exclusion of other sectors. But while these studies tend to examine only tiny slices of the problem, taken together and then combined with the foundation of history, they begin to paint a powerful picture, a tidal wave of evidence.

Finally, our path to cohesion will follow the footsteps of some current leaders, and hear their own words. Interviews with past and present leaders will
help us fill the empty spaces and keep us in touch with modern reality. Together their comments and stories will flesh out our understanding of cohesion.

What should the reader will get out of this small book? Upon completion, we sincerely hope that the reader will consider him or herself to be a master chemist, a true expert in brewing the right organizational ingredients into the strongest, cohesive bonding agents possible.