The Sinking of the Titanic:  
An Analogy of Leadership That Failed  
by Gregory P. Smith

"We have struck iceberg. . .sinking fast. . .come to our assistance." Burning the airwaves came those words late in the cold evening of 1912. Before they tapped the last bit of Morse code, those words became the epitaph over the lives of the 1200 people lost on the Titanic. The ship was doomed as it slowly sank into its watery grave. Why did the largest, most advanced ship of the century sink? Those of us who study history or remember the movie may know why. It wasn’t the iceberg that caused the disaster. It was something else. Clear in my mind was the real cause—leadership had failed. The Titanic still rests on the bottom of the ocean, but we can resurrect the truth. The lessons we learn can help us become better leaders.

Leadership is Always Responsible- Leadership is more than a wooden figurehead. Leadership is not a position, a job title or in this case, merely the Captain of the ship. Leadership is not just power, ego, and pride. Leadership is ever present, touching, motivating, talking, and checking, barrier removing, training, preparing, breathing, and moving about. This was Captain E. J. Smith’s retirement trip. He was headed for the easy life. All he had to do was get to New York. God only knows why he ignored the facts, why he ignored seven iceberg warnings from his crew and other ships. Leadership is responsible for everything the organization does or fails to do.

Biggest Is Not the Best- It took over 30 seconds before the Titanic turned away from the iceberg ... but it was too late. The larger an organization becomes, the greater its inflexibility. The more difficult and cumbersome to steer, to direct and to change. It soon becomes a bureaucracy where rules, regulations, policies, procedures and "I need permission to make a decision" becomes the norm. Today's businesses must change course quickly.

Rank Has It's Privileges?- Ranking is good for command and control, not good for change and innovation. Ranking people limits potential. Today, businesses rank and classify people-sometimes unintentionally. However, the results are the same. Whether it is simply reserved parking spaces, blue collar, white collar, temporary, part-time, those with cubicles, those with desks etc. Ask yourself, when the ship sinks, who gets in the lifeboats first? Who gets severance pay, bonus, stock options or nice hotels. Clear the lines between the classes and make everyone feel they are rowing in the same direction for the same purpose. In a disaster, everyone is an equal.

The Truth Changes- The Titanic was unsinkable. . .so they thought. So confident were they, that they only had enough life boats for half the passengers. The thinking that made us successful yesterday is the very same thinking that will cause us to fail tomorrow. Our unlearning curve must be greater than our learning curve.

Technology is Never a Substitute for Leadership- When technology fails, leadership must prevail. Captain Smith said years before the Titanic’s voyage, "I cannot imagine any
condition which would cause a ship to founder . . . Modern shipbuilding has gone beyond that." Many businesses today have placed the wrong people in charge. They are not leaders, but managers. So—when disaster strikes who is going to lead and will your technology pull you under?

**Leadership is Always Training** - As the stern of the Titanic lifted out of the water; the crew and passengers struggled with the lifeboats. There were no drills, no rehearsals and the crews stood unfamiliar with their responsibilities. The boats were improperly loaded and only one boat went back to try to recover survivors. Help people improve their skills so they can become more productive.

**Leadership Looks Below the Surface** - The greatest danger as well as the greatest opportunities lie below. The ocean in 1912 was like glass, deceptively dangerous. The biggest part of an iceberg lies below . . . unseen. Like steel fangs, it tore at the rivets along 300 feet of the Titanic's hull. Those below, the "crew and steerage," felt and saw the damage first. Like a gasping breath, the steam billowed above as chaos reigned below. Just like then and now, those who know what's wrong with your "ship" are those below. Furthermore, those below usually have the best ideas and solutions to your problems. Start looking toward those on the front-line for the ideas, problems and solutions. Do it before you hit the icebergs.

**Leadership Looks Beyond the Horizon** - Success causes problems. A good "Captain" is on the lookout for changing trends, changing needs, storms and icebergs. Sam Walton identified the need and Sears didn't. Apple computer saw the need before IBM. The vision of the Sony Walkman existed in Akio Morita's mind before RCA. Many dot coms were prepared, many were not. Get the picture? Be out there scanning the horizon for the next change.

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