Leadership Failures Sink Unsinkable Ship

Business Lessons from the Titanic

Jocelyn R. Davis
The Forum Corporation
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The Titanic disaster is one of the most familiar stories there is; it has been called the greatest news story of modern times. One hundred years later, historians are still arguing about what could have or should have been done to prevent the sinking of the “unsinkable” ship and the drowning of more than fifteen hundred passengers and crew. The massive investigations that followed the event resulted in a host of new laws and safety improvements to ships, including better hull and rudder design, safety drills for passengers, lifeboat requirements, better exit routes, and radio communications laws. But while all these strategic, technical, and legal improvements undoubtedly saved lives in the years to come, they didn’t address the catastrophe’s fundamental cause.

**ATLANTIC OCEAN, 1912**

At 11:40 on the bitterly cold night of Sunday, the 14th of April, 1912, Lookout Frederick Fleet clanged the warning bell three times high in the crow’s nest of the White Star Liner Titanic and picked up the phone to the bridge. The following conversation ensued:

“What did you see?”

“Iceberg right ahead.”

“Thank you.”

Less than three hours later, the ocean liner had sunk to the bottom of the freezing North Atlantic. Of the 2,223 people on board, only 706 survived.
A FAILURE IN LEADERSHIP

Here’s what happened: J. Bruce Ismay, the White Star Line official, persuaded Captain Edward J. Smith that it would be a fine achievement to arrive in New York a day early. An early arrival would have been a dramatic conclusion both to the Titanic’s maiden voyage and to Captain Smith’s career; this voyage was to have been his last command. Smith gave the order to light the last two boilers so the ship would go faster. He did not add to the lookouts watching for icebergs. Consequentially, in the middle of that moonless night the Titanic was racing at 22 knots through a known ice field with no increase in trouble-spotting abilities. After the collision, poor judgment, hesitancy, and lack of alignment among the officers of the Titanic and of the Californian (the nearest ship in the ocean that night and the only one that could have arrived in time to save anyone from drowning) resulted in a lethal combination of inaction and confusion on both ships.

Given that these leaders could neither make good decisions nor mobilize their crew and passengers effectively, it’s doubtful whether a larger rudder or enough lifeboats for all would have made much difference to the outcome. In the end, it was neither weak strategy, nor weak structure, nor weak technology that caused the Titanic to hit an iceberg and fifteen hundred people to die; it was weak leadership. Or perhaps we should say instead: It was leaders who counted too much on impressive strategy, structure, and technology and so failed to focus on what could have actually made the journey safe and successful: their people. (See Exhibit A, page 15, “Three Leadership Traps.”)
CLARITY, UNITY, AND AGILITY

Much has been written about leadership in a crisis, but our research has looked more generally at the leadership mindsets and skills that are associated with organizations that execute fast and well, whether in a crisis or no. As my co-authors and I show in *Strategic Speed: Mobilize People, Accelerate Execution*, leaders who drive initiatives rapidly and effectively do not spend most of their time devising brilliant strategies, improving organizational processes and structures, or installing new technologies. Rather, they tend to pay most attention to people factors—three in particular:

- **Clarity:** Creating a shared, clear understanding of the situation and direction
- **Unity:** Achieving wholehearted agreement on the merits of that direction and the need to work together to move ahead
- **Agility:** Inspiring a willingness to turn and adapt quickly while keeping strategic goals in mind

When leaders mobilize their organizations and teams around these three elements, they realize large gains in speed and performance. (See Exhibit B, page 17, “What Goes Into Clarity, Unity, and Agility,” for more detail.) In *Strategic Speed*, we provide examples of contemporary organizations in which leaders have accelerated strategic initiatives and boosted financial results by using these techniques. The *Titanic* disaster is an example from the past in which the ability or non-ability of leaders to create clar-
ity, unity, and agility led not only to effective or ineffective execution, but to life or death.

Let’s look at a few scenes from that night on the ocean in April 1912 so we can see how the ships’ leaders either succeeded or failed—and what the consequences were. We’ll first visit the wireless operators’ rooms of the *Titanic* and the *Californian*. Next we’ll go to the main decks of those two ships. Finally, we’ll head over to the *Carpathia*, the only ship that responded to the *Titanic*’s calls for help that night.

**In the Wireless Room of the *Titanic***

At about 11:00 p.m., First Operator John George Phillips was slumped at his desk in the wireless operator’s room. He had had a tough day. Wireless was still a novelty at the time, and passengers aboard ocean liners, fascinated with the new technology, tended to send lots of frivolous messages to their friends at home or on other ships. Operators were inexperienced and range was short, so there were many garbled signals and repeats. Messages tended to pile up. On that Sunday evening, Phillips was looking at what seemed a bottomless in-basket. He was at last in good contact with Cape Race on the island of Newfoundland, and he was frantically trying to clear all the traffic to and from that wireless station. Just then, the *Californian*—only a few miles away—cut in with a message about “icebergs ahead.” The other ship was so close that the Morse dots and dashes were deafening. Moreover, the message didn’t begin with the letters *MSG*, which at the time was the usual header for a message of high importance.

Phillips heard a confusing blast of sound. He snapped back, “Shut up, shut up! I am busy, I am working Cape Race!”

Seventy-five minutes later, it had become clear to the
Titanic’s officers that the liner would sink. Phillips, about to be relieved by Operator Harold Bride, was heading for his berth when Captain Smith appeared in the doorway and told them that the ship had struck an iceberg and that they should send out a distress call. Phillips took back the head-phones from Bride and began tapping out CQD—“come quickly, danger”—that era’s international distress signal.

In the Wireless Room of the Californian

At that moment, ten miles away in the wireless shack of the Californian, Operator Cyril Evans was getting ready to turn in. Third Officer Groves, a friend of his, was sitting nearby on a bunk. Groves was a telegraphy enthusiast; after his shift he liked to stop by, pick up news, and experiment with the wireless set. Evans ordinarily welcomed Groves’ company, but tonight he was in no mood to chat. He’d had a hard 14-hour day, culminating in the Titanic telling him to “shut up” when he had tried to break in and report on the ice ahead. Tired and miffed, he had shut down his set precisely at 11:30
p.m., the scheduled time to go off-duty. Now he just wanted some rest. When Groves asked him, “What ships have you got?” Evans answered tersely: “Only the *Titanic.*” Groves, finding his efforts at conversation rebuffed, picked up the headphones and put them on; he was pretty good at reading simple messages. But, being an amateur, he didn’t realize he had to wind up the magnetic detector for the set to work—and Evans didn’t point that out. The set wasn’t on, so Groves heard nothing. He gave up and left. Evans went to sleep.

**On the Main Deck of the *Titanic***

By around 1:00 a.m., the *Titanic* was in a state of utter confusion. Not only were there insufficient lifeboats for everyone (there were only 20 lifeboats with a total capacity of 1,178 persons); as well, the crew had no clue as to the procedures for getting more than 2,000 people into lifejackets and off the ship.

When the ocean liner first hit the iceberg, most of the passengers barely noticed, and no one was particularly perturbed. Then the news got around, and a number of people in all three classes—First, Second, and Steerage—went out on their respective decks in hopes of a little excitement. It was freezing outside, however, and the ship seemed perfectly stable, so most of them quickly returned to their cabins and lounges. Later, when the call went out for all women and children to board the lifeboats, many people still didn’t believe the ship was really sinking, so they paid no attention. In fact, by the time Steward John Hart got around to escorting some small groups from Steerage up to the lifeboats, he didn’t have much luck—partly because he kept assuring them there was no danger, partly because many didn’t understand English, and partly because, again, the ship *seemed* perfectly fine. Hart found that as soon as he got some of those passengers into the lifeboats,
they would get out and go back inside where it was warm.

The following scene, described by Walter Lord in *A Night to Remember*, his classic account of the disaster, captures the total lack of clarity about the situation:

With one foot in [lifeboat] No. 6 and one on deck, [Second Officer Charles] Lightoller now called for women and children. The response was anything but enthusiastic. Why trade the bright decks of the *Titanic* for a few dark hours in a rowboat? Even John Jacob Astor ridiculed the idea: “We are safer here than in that little boat.”

**On the Main Deck of the *Californian***

A little later, on the *Californian*—a mere ten miles away—a similar sense of complacency was evident. The *Titanic* had been firing rockets for hours, but since they were white, not red, the *Californian’s* captain and officers thought they were part of some sort of celebration. As the ship sank, Second Officer Herbert Stone remarked to a crew member on the odd way it was floating in the water, but he received only a shrug in response. When the ship disappeared, the two men assumed it was steaming away. It never occurred to them to wonder if it were sinking.

When dawn came at about 4:00 a.m., the *Californian’s* First Officer Frederick Stewart arrived on deck to relieve Stone. Stone informed Stewart about the ship that had fired eight rockets, and he added that at around 3:40 he had seen another rocket fired, but this time from another ship that was clearly much farther south. (This was the *Carpathia*, racing to the disaster site.) Stone then headed for bed, leaving Stewart on the bridge. At 4:30 Stewart woke the captain and repeated the information Stone had conveyed; the captain said, “I know. He’s been telling me.”
Stewart dropped the whole thing until 5:40 a.m., when Wireless Operator Evans woke up. Stewart told him there had been a ship firing rockets, and asked him to find out if anything was wrong. Evans put on the headphones and tuned in. Two minutes later, Stewart tore up to the bridge with the news: “The *Titanic* has hit a berg and sunk!”

Upon the *Californian*’s arrival, the *Carpathia* had already been on the scene for two hours.

**Aboard the *Carpathia***

The *Carpathia*, a steamship about one-eighth the size of the *Titanic*, was bound on that Sunday night from New York to Rijeka, the principal port of Croatia. Upon receiving the *Titanic*’s distress call, the ship responded immediately and beat all speed records in a 58-mile race across the Atlantic, zig-zagging through ice floes and arriving at about 4:00 a.m. (sooner than any other ship, but still too late to save any but those in the lifeboats).

The *Carpathia*’s Captain Arthur Rostron had been awakened a little after midnight by Harold Cottam, the ship’s wireless operator who had received the CQD call. Upon learning of the *Titanic*’s message, Rostron instantly ordered the chief engineer to reverse course and make all speed for the sinking ocean liner. Every crewmember raced to lend a hand; every stoker found a shovel and heaped coal into the boilers. Rostron ordered the heat and hot water cut off so that every ounce of steam would power the ship. He tripled the number of lookouts to ensure that icebergs could be spotted early.

Rostron then marshaled the leaders of the crew and had them organize the ship for rescue operations. The officers, surgeons, pursers, and stewards—all were set to a task, whether it was swinging out every lifeboat, rigging chair
slings for the injured, finding two thousand blankets, or preparing coffee for all hands. Rostron even told a crew-member to get some oil ready to pour down the lavatories in case the sea grew rough. Stewards were stationed in every corridor. If any passengers started wandering around, they were to be told firmly that the Carpathia was not in danger and to go back to their cabins.

Earlier, Rostron had done something else: a small thing, often ignored in books about the tragedy. When he heard the terrible news from the radio operator, he ordered Carpathia’s new course immediately—before checking the wireless message to ascertain that the report was true and before calculating the two ships’ relative positions. Right away he turned the ship around and ordered all off-duty firemen to the boiler room to get up steam; and then, he verified the report, calculated the Titanic’s position (a fairly time-consuming task in those days), and adjusted the Carpathia’s course as she was racing forward. In other words, Rostron didn’t wait at a standstill until all facts could be known and all positions pinpointed, nor did he charge blindly forward without making course corrections. He moved, then evaluated, then adjusted course—and kept on moving. His sequence of actions probably cut just 15 minutes off the Carpathia’s time; and yet, that quarter of an hour was 7 percent of the total time of the journey.

Rostron’s ship arrived on the scene at daybreak, picking up the first lifeboat at 4:10 a.m. From that point on, the rescue operation was fast and flawless.
What conclusions should business leaders draw from this tale of three ships? One might argue that the crew of the *Carpathia* were simply thrown into one of those dire situations in which the urgency is so obvious that people drop everything and get the job done. Create a sufficiently strong sense of urgency, and execution will follow—so say some management gurus. But that explanation won’t do: the officers and crews of the *Titanic* and *Californian* faced just such a situation, and in the end—despite numerous examples of heroism that night—
they didn’t get the job done. What made the difference?

The answer is leaders’ attention to people factors, or lack thereof. As in organizations that operate on dry land, it was the ships’ leaders’ ability or inability to drive clarity, unity, and agility that made the difference to speed and performance over the course of the crisis. On two of the liners, a complete lack of clarity, unity, and agility led to slow and chaotic execution that resulted in disaster. In one of them, the Carpathia, there was a leader who focused intuitively on those people factors and as a result achieved rapid, fluid, and effective execution that ended up saving 700 lives. (See Exhibit C, page 20, “Levels of Clarity, Unity, and Agility on Three Ships,” for specific examples of how the people factors affected the outcome.)

A week later, the Carpathia’s Captain Rostron appeared before the U.S. Senate committee investigating the disaster. His testimony was reported in the Worcester Telegram of April 20, 1912. Here is an excerpt from the article:

In discussing the strength of the Carpathia’s wireless, Capt. Rostron said the Carpathia was only 58 miles from the Titanic when the call for help came. “ Providential,” exclaimed Representative Hughes, no longer able to control his emotion.

“Providential!” repeated the captain.

“The whole thing. Our wireless operator was not on duty, but as he was undressing he had his apparatus to his ear. Ten minutes later, he would have been in bed and we never would have heard.”

Did the Carpathia’s success come down to “providence”?
Leadership Failures Sink Ship

Luck surely played a role, but the situation appears in a different light when we contrast the actions of Harold Cottam, the wireless operator on the *Carpathia*, with those of his counterparts: Operator John George Phillips of the *Titanic* (“Shut up, shut up! I am busy, I am working Cape Race!”) and Operator Cyril Evans of the *Californian* (who turned off his set promptly at 11:30 p.m. and didn’t feel like helping his friend Groves listen for late messages). Harold Cottam, off duty and undressing at 12:30 a.m., “had his apparatus to his ear.” We’ll never know why: did he just forget to remove the device, or was he still listening for messages because he was slightly more motivated and interested in his job than the average wireless operator? Whatever the reason, Cottam alone heard, understood, and acted on the *Titanic’s* distress call—which suggests that the most impactful leadership skills were not those the *Carpathia’s* officers used during the rescue itself but, rather, those they used during the previous months in order to create a shipboard environment in which an off-duty wireless operator would: a) still have his receiver to his ear; b) recognize the significance of the crackling message he heard; and c) be confident that, when he reported it, his leaders would pay attention and respond.

What befell the *Titanic*, its crew, and its passengers is a result of leaders at all levels failing to align and mobilize people in the months leading up to the crisis and during the crisis itself. Today, and in less disastrous situations, the same factors apply. Ultimately, the speed and success with which your organization executes—on large initiatives and on everyday tasks, in crises and in ordinary times—will come down to the small, often-unnoticed actions and attitudes of each associate, as directed and influenced by each leader. A well-designed ship is helpful, as are inspired
strategies, sound processes, and supportive technologies; but every day, those factors are trumped by the behaviors of your “crew members”: the purchasing manager, the director of sales, the receptionist, the independent contractor, the head of marketing, the software engineer, and the multitude of other individuals who hold the fate of your business in their hands.

On the *Titanic*, poor leadership trumped impressive design and sank an unsinkable ship. Today, it’s time for business leaders to pay less attention to designing “unsinkable” organizations and strategies, and more attention to mobilizing people. The reward: greater speed, without hitting icebergs.

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3  ibid

Our research suggests that effective execution depends mainly on leaders’ ability to align and mobilize people. But many leaders tend to overlook people factors and fall into one of the following traps.

1. The *Brilliant Strategy* Trap
   Leaders put most of their efforts into researching and devising an ambitious strategy that will, they hope, vault them ahead of the competition. They pay a lot of attention to writing it up. They pay little attention to building the understanding, buy-in, and skills that would ensure its execution. As a result, the strategy never bears fruit.
2. The **Efficient Process and Structure** Trap
Leaders give most of their attention to process reengineering and organization design, thinking, “If we can just get everything lined up in the right order and all sources of waste eliminated, things will run smoothly.” They fail to realize that an efficient business is not necessarily a successful business and, moreover, that people are rarely guided by official process maps.

3. The **Sophisticated Technology** Trap
Leaders throw technology at problems in the mistaken belief that it’s the strongest, quickest, most lasting lever for changing how a business operates. What they don’t see is that technology is actually a weak, cumbersome, and transitory lever *unless* it’s designed and installed with the explicit intention of helping people be more effective.
EXHIBIT B
WHAT GOES INTO CLARITY, UNITY, AND AGILITY

Our research uncovered the nine organizational characteristics that correlate most highly with fast, effective execution of strategies and strategic initiatives. All nine are about people’s beliefs and behaviors. When leaders focus on strengthening these characteristics, strategies are accelerated and results improve.

Clarity
1. People have a shared understanding of our strategy at a detailed level.
2. People focus their efforts on a critical few priorities.
3. Our strategy has been translated into concrete and achievable goals and behaviors.
Unity
1. We have commitment at all levels to the success of our strategy.
2. We staff strategic initiatives with team members who are capable and can dedicate sufficient time.
3. A spirit of teamwork and cross-boundary collaboration is evident throughout the organization.

Agility
1. People stay open and flexible in the way that goals are met.
2. People maintain a bias for action while correcting course as needed.
3. People capture and communicate what they learn from initiatives and projects.
## Levels of Clarity, Unity, and \textit{Clarity}

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>\textbf{CLARITY}</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>\textit{TITANIC}</td>
<td>LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The captain’s goal was ill-defined (“get to New York in record time”)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There was no clear, consistent plan for getting people into lifeboats and off the ship</td>
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<tr>
<td>\textit{CALIFORNIAN}</td>
<td>LOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The wireless operator sent an ambiguous warning message about “icebergs ahead” and didn’t ensure it had been understood</td>
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<tr>
<td>\textit{CARPATHIA}</td>
<td>HIGH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Captain Rostron double-checked the Titanic’s distress call and communicated the new course and situation to the entire crew</td>
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### Agility on the Three Ships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNITY</th>
<th>AGILITY</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>LOW</strong>&lt;br&gt;The captain never revealed or discussed his goal with crew members&lt;br&gt;The officers were unable to create a sense of urgency or cooperation to get the passengers to board the lifeboats</td>
<td><strong>LOW</strong>&lt;br&gt;No one heeded the iceberg warnings or made appropriate adjustments to avoid hitting one&lt;br&gt;The captain failed to post extra lookouts or make any other adjustments for the increase in speed</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>LOW</strong>&lt;br&gt;There was little coordination or helpfulness among the wireless operators, nor persistence in getting a clear warning to the <em>Titanic</em>&lt;br&gt;The captain and officers showed no sense of common purpose or adherence to a set of common standards</td>
<td><strong>LOW</strong>&lt;br&gt;The officers ignored the <em>Titanic</em>’s distress rockets and made complacent assumptions about what was going on in their vicinity</td>
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<td><strong>HIGH</strong>&lt;br&gt;Rostron set everyone to a task, creating a strong sense of purpose and teamwork; the officers and crew worked together seamlessly</td>
<td><strong>HIGH</strong>&lt;br&gt;Rostron made adjustments to gain maximum speed while scanning the waters with extra lookouts to avoid danger&lt;br&gt;He didn’t wait to act until all the facts were known, nor did he forge blindly ahead, but moved immediately, evaluated the situation, and corrected course while in motion</td>
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It’s a fact: success in business goes to the swift. It’s about who can create the most value—smarter and faster than the competition. Yet the majority of strategic initiatives fail to implement successfully and on time—even with streamlined processes in place, detailed graphs to chart your course, and plenty of resources on hand to get the job done. Why?

In *Strategic Speed*, co-authors Jocelyn R. Davis, Ed Boswell and Henry Frechette argue that an exclusive focus on pace and process often leads to only superficial speed: lots of activity, but little forward motion. To achieve “strategic speed”—implementing strategies both quickly and well—leaders need to make people the key ingredient in their success formula. The authors show how three people factors can provide a powerful accelerator for organizational speed and performance: clarity (understanding
the goal), unity (cross-company collaboration), and agility (adapting quickly).

From big change initiatives to everyday work projects, *Strategic Speed* will help you move past paying lip service to faster execution—and arm your people with the tools to make it really happen.

To learn more about creating clarity, unity and agility in your organization, order your copy of *Strategic Speed* from Harvard Business Review Press or Amazon.com.

“In *Strategic Speed*, we finally get the implementation model that needs to go with the strategy.”

—Len Schlesinger, President, Babson College

“Where urgency meets execution. This book helps leaders tackle their greatest challenge: turning plans into action, fast.”

—Walt Macnee, President, International Markets, MasterCard Worldwide
A veteran of The Forum Corporation since 1989, Jocelyn R. Davis leads Forum’s global research and development function. She is responsible for Forum’s strategies regarding creating and leveraging intellectual property, which includes original research, learning programs, and other core content. Jocelyn is co-author of Forum’s latest book, *Strategic Speed: Mobilize People, Accelerate Execution* (Harvard Business Press, June 2010). She is the recipient of numerous awards including three of Forum’s Corporate Excellence Awards, a Forum Manager of the Year Award, and two Human Resource Executive Training Products Awards for sales and teaming courses. She holds a bachelor’s degree in philosophy with high honors from Swarthmore College and a Master of Arts in philosophy from the University of Pittsburgh.