

# Waking the Captain

“High water everywhere...  
Things are breaking up out there.”

--Bob Dylan

On Valentine’s Day 2002, a woman named Sherron Watkins testified before the United States Congress that she had warned former Enron Chairman and CEO Kenneth Lay in a seven-page memo that she was worried that “we will implode in a wave of accounting scandals.” Members of Congress praised the former vice president for corporate development for her courage to expose the corporate irresponsibility of Enron’s top management.

A scant three months later, another courageous woman testified before Congress about a memo that she had sent to her boss. In FBI Special Agent Coleen Rowley’s own words: “To get to the point, I have deep concerns that a delicate and subtle shading/skewing of facts by you and others at the highest levels of FBI management has occurred and is occurring.” Agent Rowley, who as a fifth grader set a goal to join the FBI, was addressing FBI Director Robert Mueller concerning the FBI investigation in the aftermath of 9-11.

Both Ms. Watkins and Agent Rowley were expressing a combination of anger and concern about previous actions taken by their superiors and the continuing direction their leaders were taking. They told of ignored warnings, bureaucratic buffoonery, and in some instances, criminal conduct. Both were determined to challenge what they saw as a gross dereliction of duty by their superiors.

In the popular lexicon of exposing government or corporate shenanigans, Watkins and Rowley’s action would be described as “blowing the whistle.” In the words of author and poet David Whyte, however, each woman was trying to “wake the captain” of her organizational ship.

In his most recent book, *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity*, Whyte tells the story of his waking in the middle of the night and realizing that his boat was drifting perilously close to the rocks in the choppy waters off the Galapagos Islands. He awakened just in time to steer the boat away from the rocks and avoid what could have been a fatal encounter for the ship’s crew.

The captain of the ship was new and had fallen asleep. But later as his initial anger at the captain began to slip away, Whyte realized that it was all too convenient to place all the blame at the captain’s feet.

The ship’s previous captain was “a robust, strapping man...and the great irony in his all-knowing alertness,” was that he had lulled Whyte and the other crew members “*into a lack of responsibility at the very core.*”

“He...had so filled his role of captain to capacity that we ourselves had become incapacitated in one crucial area: We had given up our own *inner sense of captaincy*...we had come to the decision that the ultimate responsibility lay elsewhere,” Whyte wrote.

Later Whyte told the story of the near disaster to a recently retired admiral from the U.S. Navy. The admiral summed it all up: “A good crew doesn’t let a new captain fail.”

Nor, of course, does a worthy captain fail his crew. Kenneth Lay didn’t just fail his crew, he ran away from his responsibility with all the speed of a wildebeest escaping the jaws of the hungry lion.

While new FBI captain Mueller can find temporary solace in a still-out jury, the passengers on the vessel of *Public Opinion* will abandon ship in droves if they suspect more CYA cover-ups instead of character and credibility, bureaucratic buck passing rather than buck stopping. The public is sick and tired of conduct unbecoming an officer, whether it is in government, organized religion or corporate America.

Thankfully, association executives are unlikely to ever be in such a public spotlight as Ms. Watkins and Agent Rowley. But as any seasoned association Chief Staff Officer will tell you, in the glass house of association management, the destructive demons are always lurking a mere stone’s throw away.

So what lessons can we learn from Watkins and Rowley? For one, their actions remind us to remain vigilant when we sense our ship is off course, even if it is unintentional or the damage potential is not catastrophic.

For another, in our leadership positions we must always be motivated by what we think is best for our organization, not just for ourselves. We do have an obligation to all crewmembers when we hit the rougher seas of our voyage.

Third, leadership is not a position or place of authority. John Gardner writes, “Never confuse status with leadership.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“People say I give them hell.  
I just tell them the truth,  
And they think it’s hell!”

--Former President Harry S. Truman

In associations and non profit organizations, it is not always easy or clear to identify where the buck actually stops. Is it the CSO or the board? The board chair? An association organizational chart may not reflect the reality of who is the true “captain”. For the purposes of this article, however, I am assigning the role of “captain” to the organization’s board of directors. The CSO is a member of the crew.

Consider the following scenario:

After attempts to alert the board to what he strongly believes is a direction for disaster, the CSO:

- a) Makes one more effort to convince the board that in his opinion the policy is wrong and will hurt the association and asks the board to reconsider or table the decision.
- b) Makes it clear to the board that he disagrees, but agrees to implement the policy.
- c) Refuses to implement the policy, resigns or is fired.

In which of these actions, if any, has the executive acted on “his own inner sense of captaincy?” With what action has he given this up?

To be fair to the reader, too many facts are unknown. How long has the issue been around? Has it been fully deliberated? Will it have real “life or death” potential for the association? For the sake of argument, let’s say it is a very serious issue that, if mishandled could have severe long term repercussions for the organization. To illustrate, here’s my story:

Several years ago as the CSO of my organization, I was the executive on the Texas long horns of such a dilemma. For 20 years, I had been the chief lobbyist and loyal soldier for the Texas Motor Transportation Association in its “life or death” struggle with corporations and business groups who advocated the economic deregulation of intrastate trucking rates and routes. One legislative fight after another, we had been successful, losing a firefight here and there, but never a major battle.

But after years of depleting our resources on this one issue, having to short-shift other major issues, seeing the opposition grow smarter and better funded, I knew it was time to change our strategy. The last straw was when one of the staunchest legislative supporters draped his arm over my shoulder and said, “Robert, let my people go.”

It was time to try to wake the captain. For over three decades the captain had shouted to all that would listen: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Imagination and originality were not our strongest suits.

I felt strongly that a new course of action was needed if we were to maintain some control over our destiny and made the best argument I could to the captain. The captain pretended to listen, nodded his head a couple of times and then shouted, “If in ain’t broke don’t fix it.” He then took off his gimme cap, and stuck his head back where nary a ray of sunshine had ever ventured.

Tired, worn out and frustrated, I resigned. The irony: two months after my resignation was final on October 31, 1994, the United States Congress federally preempted intrastate trucking regulation, and the captain, brown eyes blinking in the bright sunlight, emerged into a free marketplace.

While some companies did disappear in a deregulated world, many prospered. But in the uncertainty of the first waves of change, the association leadership at both the staff and board levels fell apart. Rather than looking to the future, the board captain remained mired in the past. As a result, the association drifted into a much smaller and weaker version of itself.

To my credit, I had tried to wake the captain. Knowing that it was a major personal risk, I had steeled myself for rejection of both the message and the messenger. I had effectively steered the association and the industry through the treacherous waters of Texas politics for many years and felt that I had paid my dues.

But when it came to navigating the ship through the hazardous straits of change, downsizing, budget-cutting and loss of political clout, I was A.W.O.L. -- the first man overboard, abandoning the crew, leaving it leaderless and aimlessly floating in a sea of unpredictability and uncertainty.

In retrospect, I have little doubt that I was ready for a new ship and that within a year or two, I would have looked for a new captain and crew. But in my mirror of reflection, I should have stayed long enough to have helped the damaged ship and crew reach smoother seas. I failed to wake my own inner captain and to take "responsibility at my very core" to see the ship to safe harbor.

\*\*\*\*\*

"O Captain! My Captain! Our fearful trip is done,  
The Ship has weathered every rack,  
The prize we sought is won."

---Walt Whitman

When things go wrong in an organization, the first action is to look for someone to blame. In perilous times, however, the responsible captain never blames his crew and a loyal and competent crew member does not leave his captain or his responsibility to others. When the captain fails or refuses to accept responsibility, the members of the crew do not have the luxury to "give up their own inner sense of captaincy" or to rationalize that the ultimate responsibility lays elsewhere."

Rowley and Watkins did not stop when their captains refused to be awakened. When their captains did not respond, these loyal crewmembers did not just return to their cabins and say, "Well, I tried." Instead, they reached deep inside themselves and found their own inner sense of captaincy. In the end, the American public may never fully know how much we owe these two women for being so courageous and incorruptible.

If on some darkened night you discover that your ship is sailing toward danger, will you try to wake your captain? And if the captain still sleeps, will you be prepared to lead your crew to safety?

These are tough questions with no easy answers, but this I believe. It is in our every day tasks, our routine decisions and the way we treat people on a daily basis that we establish who we are and what we are about. It is what we learn from these incidental and sometimes even trivial tests that will increase our capacity to find our own inner sense of captaincy when the inevitable crisis comes. Good luck and Godspeed.

Robert A. Floyd, CAE. Strategic Leadership Consultants. 210 Ashworth. Austin, Texas 78746. 512.970.9708. [raf@stratleader.com](mailto:raf@stratleader.com). [www@stratleader.com](http://www@stratleader.com). Strategic Leadership Consultants is an Austin, Texas based firm providing value to organizations through leadership development, effective governance, strategic planning, public affairs and lobbying, organizational performance, media and communications, grassroots advocacy, strategic alliances and managing coalitions