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To lead effectively, follow example of 19th century explorers Lewis and Clark

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REAL LIFE LEADERSHIP

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Question: Our business is growing rapidly, and we are finding that we must change in order to continue to grow. How do we make tough decisions about how to change?

Answer: If running a business were always the same, we would be doing the same things over and over again, and the world would pass us by. Growing a business is about learning how to change responsibly. There are lots of questions involved in such a situation. Here's a 200-year-old story that can help us see what we need to do.

In early June of 1805, a team of explorers — the Lewis and Clark expedition — was headed west up the Missouri River and had gotten to the site of present-day Loma, Mont. This was a place where no person of European descent had ever been — they were literally off the map.

The expedition came to a junction in the river that was unknown to them. Over the course of a year of travel up the river, and a long winter with the Mandan tribe in what is now North Dakota, no one they met had spoken of this fork in the river (we know it as the confluence of the Marias and Missouri rivers).

They were at a crossroads. So what did they do? They stopped. They spent time orienting themselves as to where they were. They divided up and explored both rivers. They talked through their options. Then Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, as the leaders, made the ultimate decision.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? It wasn't. Here are the complicating factors.

The river that they have been moving up was milky in color. Their information told them that they would find waterfalls. What they found was a river going north that was milky in color, and another going west that was clear. And there was no sign of waterfalls. The team wanted to go north. Lewis and Clark instead chose to go west. They made the right choice. Within a few days, they came to the falls at present-day Great Falls, Mont.

The lesson for us in this story is that when we are moving through unknown territory — as we do with a growing business — we need to constantly orient ourselves. This holds true not only for products, markets, clients and cash flow, but also in terms of where your team is. The keys are orientation to your situation, communication with your team and making and implementing decisions that carry your business in the right direction. It is the leader's responsibility to make sure these steps are followed.

Lewis and Clark did not function as a top-down leadership organization. Rather, they were the first 21st century leadership team. By communicating as a team, they were able figure out where they were going. By sharing leadership, they became the most successful expedition in U.S. history. We can succeed by following their example. Leading as a team is the key to the decisions you need to make.

This is the opinion of Ed Brenegar, president of the Community of Leadership, a leadership development and transition-planning consultancy. He writes the Leading Questions blog at <http://edbrenegar.typepad.com>. Send questions to him at ed@edbrenegar.com.

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