

# To Succeed, Fly in V-Formation

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## Episode UYL2310

Podcast Date: June 7, 2023



A couple of years ago we moved to a new home whose patio overlooks a beautiful golf course, with lots of ponds and streams. We have abundant wildlife in our backyard on regular occasions, including some flocks of geese which call some of the ponds home. While I'm having my morning coffee, they are frequently feeding along the fairway just beyond my backyard. One pair of geese hatched five young ones this year, and I've enjoyed watching them grow up.

As I check them out each morning, my mind often goes back to the concepts I want to share with you today – lessons learned from watching geese. What lessons can a leader learn from a long-neck goose? Stick around for the next few minutes and see. What you'll hear is sure to upsize your leadership.

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In my youth, growing up on a farm, I always liked to watch the annual migration of geese. We rarely saw them up close. They were always flying high in the sky, headed south to winter feeding grounds on the Gulf Coast. Or making their return trip north the following spring.

I therefore always saw them flying far up in the air, in V-formation. Now, if you're not a wildlife enthusiast, you may not understand why they fly in this V-shaped configuration. It's to provide for resilience and endurance. Their migration paths require them to fly days on end. And full-grown geese are fairly large birds. Hours of flight are taxing, exhausting. They need every advantage which they can muster.

The V-formation is one of those advantages. Properly positioned, each bird (except for the one at the point) flies in the draft of the bird just ahead of it. The technique is called slipstreaming. Each bird's motion cavitates the air around it. Momentarily, because of the cavity, there is less air resistance at that point. By entering the cavity with perfect timing, the bird immediately behind can take advantage of the decreased resistance and maintain speed with less effort. This preserves energy and allows for longer flights in one stretch.

The goose in the lead, however, does not have this advantage. The lead goose must contend with the full strength of the wind and air resistance. As he tires, he drops back in the formation and another takes his place at the lead.

After I opened my leadership development firm in 2001, I began borrowing those flights of geese as a metaphor in corporate trainings. If your company is going to fly high, I would say, it

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must fly in V-formation. As fellow-managers and fellow-workers, you must slipstream one another. Make success easier for your colleagues. Maintain continuous collaborative and mutually-supportive cooperation. And that collaboration and cooperation must rigorously support two critical V's – your vision and your values.

For years, I fundamentally taught the metaphor that way. Then my consulting practice opened my eyes to something which I had missed. It's not two V's that must be constantly in mind. It's three. I'll share that third V in a moment – and in terms of determining corporate success, it may be more important than the other two.

First, however, let's look at the first two V's – vision and values. It's somewhat obligatory in management training, of course, to address vision. It's like referring to the founding fathers in a July 4 speech. Everyone knows that you're going to do it.

And perhaps for that reason, we often talk about vision in rather perfunctory language. We acknowledge its importance, pay tribute to its role, and make at least some stab at writing a vision statement. But I never cease to be amazed how many high-level managers and executives cannot clearly articulate their organization's vision. It's not part of their "intellectual furniture," as one of my professors used to say. It's a decorative piece that they have set on a bookshelf or placed on a placard. But they do not consciously use it as a constant guide when setting priorities or making critical decisions.

I remember asking one senior vice-president in a multi-billion-dollar organization to state the company's vision statement for me in his own words. He began furtively looking around his office, muttering aloud, "I think I have one of those things around here someplace." Tell me that vision was taken seriously on his corporate team.

To even mention vision in my remarks, therefore, I feel compelled to comment on the importance of mission in any culture, whether it's the culture of a company, a political movement, or a society. In a word, vision is what gives meaning to the sacrifice, dedication, and commitment that leaders ask of their people.

Vision is more than merely a dream that provides a sense of direction or that serves as a reference point for aligning priorities, as vital as these functions may be. Vision's greater power is its ability to address our deep need to have meaning at the core of our existence. A "why" for pressing on.

No one likes "busy work," because it has no purpose. No meaning. Yet, in the absence of vision, all action quickly degenerates into busy work. Motion without meaning. Vision is therefore the first step toward a life filled with meaning, and meaning is essential if life is to have fulfillment.

Not all leaders, to be sure, have the gift of great intuitive insights that translate into exhilarating vision. Nor is it necessary for every leader to have such a gift. After all, if every leader in your organization is a visionary by instinct, you could easily end up with too many cooks in the kitchen.

Some of the most talented and effective leaders I've ever worked with would be among the first to tell you that they are not visionary thinkers. But what they do have is the ability to recognize a compelling vision when they see it, identify with it, make it their own, and communicate it inspirationally to those whom they lead. Only when leaders convey meaning through vision-

casting will organizations and cultures reach their highest potential, for only then will sacrifice and commitment have meaning.

The second V – values – takes us into territory that I talk about routinely. Anyone who follows my podcasts and writings knows that values work their way into my conversations with great frequency. Values are the gravitational center of motivation. Or to put it another way, we are not motivated to do anything which has no value for us.

But values are a tricky concept in terms of corporate leadership. They slip back and forth from being standards to being rewards. Normally, when you see a list of corporate values, they serve as standards. They are the way that the organization measures what it does to be certain that its actions conform with proper codes of ethics and morality. We publicize these standards, because we want every worker to use them as guides in the way that they carry out their duties.

However, for workers to follow these standards, there must be some reward which they receive in turn. That is, pursuing this corporate value must result in the satisfaction of some personal value. The same is true with clients or customers. They may be attracted to our firm or company because of our corporate values. But they opt to do business with us because we fulfill some personal value for them.

I sometimes distinguish between these two by talking about “core values” (in the plural) and “core value” (in the singular). Core values are the standards which we espouse as a company. Core value is the personal benefit which our clients and customers receive by doing business with us and which workers receive by working for us. For sake of clarity, I commonly refer to these respectively as buyer core value and worker core value.

Because core values are standards, they are objective. They are in the mind of the company. Core value is subjective. It’s in the heart of the customer or the employee. Core values determine what we as a company *should* do. Core value determines what our buyers and workers *will* do.

Flying in V-formation calls for staying focused on both core values and core value. In corporate planning, there is generally a great divorce between discussions of core values and conversations about core value. The people who conduct or initiate conversations about core values are normally corporate management, particularly top management. The place where you hear discussions of buyer core value (although the term “core value” is not generally used) is in marketing and sales. If it’s addressed at all, worker core value most likely comes up in HR circles. What I would suggest is that all values, regardless of type, should be discussed in tandem and in the same conversations. Ultimately, the challenge for leadership and management is to answer one question: how can we deliver our buyer core value in a manner which is true to our worker core value and our corporate core values? Everything else which contributes to corporate success eventually comes back to this one question.

In the final analysis, customers take both types of values into account when making a buying decision. If they have a choice, they will not satisfy their buyer core value by doing business with a company whose core values either differ from their personal values or serve as little more than window dressing for marketing purposes. To fly in V-formation, companies must never take their eye off of corporate core values, buyer core value, and worker core value.

Somewhere along the way, however, about 15 years ago, I came to the realization that organizations must go beyond espousing or even embracing core values. Those values must

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also become corporate virtues. While closely related, the concepts of values and virtues differ markedly. If I ask you what you value, you will tell me what you believe in. But if someone describes your virtues, they will tell me how you behave. That's because we espouse values, but we embody virtues.

Or worded another way, virtues are values held dear enough that we translate them into action. When I was explaining this distinction to a client one day, he summed it up nicely. "Virtues," he said, "are values with legs."

Ideally, all of our values would have "legs." That is, our corporate life would fully embody every value which we espouse. We would unfailingly walk our talk. Unfortunately, that's not always the case. Individuals and organizations frequently hold to values — even passionately defending them — that never get more than lip service. (Take a moment to list your organization's values, then ask yourself, "Which ones of these are indeed corporate virtues?")

I know organizations who pride themselves on empowerment as one of their core values. But when you talk to workers who are supposedly "empowered," you find them constantly on pins and needles. One little mistake, they fear, will lead to immediate censure. Why such fear? Because they've experienced a corporate culture which talks empowerment, but practices tight-fisted control. They find themselves in an organization where empowerment is merely a value, not yet a virtue.

When there's a sharp disconnect between espoused values and what the culture actually embodies, workers and volunteers have a name for it. They call it "corporate hypocrisy." And they lay the blame squarely on top management, as well they should. A primary duty of leadership is to translate corporate values into corporate virtues.

Yet that's a tall order. It calls not merely for leadership, but for transformational leadership. Why? Because defining values is an intellectual exercise. Developing virtues is a transformational enterprise.

Thus, to translate values into virtues, leaders must be adept at transforming corporate culture. This means first and foremost that leaders must set the example themselves. They should never expect their organization to embody virtues which they do not embody themselves.

Second, leaders must align rewards with desired virtues. Right after I started my firm, one of my clients — a major national bank — identified customer retention and satisfaction as one of its primary values. It launched a high-dollar publicity campaign, both internally and externally, to promote its commitment to this value.

But customer retention was never factored into bonuses and promotions. Instead, bonuses and promotions continued to be based on how successfully a loan officer sold certain high-margin products and services. Selling was rewarded. Customer retention was not. And needless to say, for all the talk about keeping the customer satisfied, customer turnover made no improvement. Customer retention never became a virtue.

Third, "hero stories" must reinforce desired virtues. In every organization there are stories about individuals whose behavior is held up for praise and admiration. These are the people who become corporate heroes. Leaders should purposefully foster only those hero stories which

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reflect desired virtues. If team cooperation is a desired virtue, don't celebrate the accomplishments of people who achieve great things by striking out on their own. If you want to be known as an organization with a family-friendly atmosphere, avoid telling hero stories about people who consistently work 70 hours a week.

Our word "virtue" is derived from the Latin term *virtus*, which means "strength" and comes from the Latin word *vir*, meaning "man." In effect, "virtue" originally meant "what makes a man a man." Our virtues are our strengths, both corporately and individually. They make us what we are.

To the Romans a man without *virtus* was a man without strength. Likewise, an organization is only as strong as its genuine virtues. Virtues don't just happen. They are developed through discipline. And through leadership — the leadership of men and women know how to "put legs on values."

In sum, then, that's what I mean by "flying in V-formation." Vision. Values. Virtues. I'm sometimes tempted to add another "V" to that list: Vantage. Or Viewpoint. Flying in V-formation means keeping a proper vantage on the reality around you.

Which brings me to another goose story, which is what brought the word "vantage" to mind. This encounter with geese also happened in my adolescent years. My family lived in one of the last houses on the edge of our small town, which had a population of only 4000. It was a safe place and no one worried about walking streets alone at night. I therefore commonly walked the mile-and-a-half home after a ballgame or a late-night practice.

Most of the streets in town were somewhat narrow, many without curbs. But there was one major north-south multilane thoroughfare which ran near our home. Because it carried so much traffic, it was one the first streets in town to get bright lighting its entire length. The city installed mercury vapor lights, the state of the art in those days.

One late fall evening, I was walking home about 10 p.m. after a basketball game. As I drew near that broad boulevard, I kept hearing a very strange sound. I had never heard anything quite like it. I could tell it was coming from birds. Lots of them. But it was not a sound which I could associate with any bird that I had ever encountered.

As I finally approached the street, I saw an absolutely bizarre site. For the past two or three hours, there had been a steady drizzle of rain. The street was covered in a thin coat of water. And with the blue mercury vapor lights playing off of the wet pavement, it looked like a nice, wide river.

As flights of geese passed overhead, they were spotting this supposed river and making a full-speed approach to land on it. The strange sound which I had heard was their scream of surprise and agony as they hit the pavement at full speed and went tumbling tail over head along the street. There were already about a hundred birds squirming in confusion on the pavement, with more flights pouring in behind them.

So, I will add that fourth V. Vantage. Always be aware that the surrounding landscape is not always what it appears. Don't trust your instincts. Before you decide where to put down your weight, rely on a fifth V. Verify.

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