



LYLE'S LAWS

Lyle's Law of Whaleboats

WHEN MY THIRD-OLDEST BROTHER graduated from high school in 1943, he immediately enlisted in the U.S. Navy, following my oldest brother who joined the navy in 1941 and my second brother who joined the Army Air Corps in 1942. He went to boot camp in what always seemed to me to be about the least likely place for a naval station, Farragut, ID. While Farragut is far from the sea, the naval training station was on the shore of Lake Pend Oreille, so I presume the *boats* were required to engage in what was at that time a navy rite of passage—rowing a whaleboat.

Clifford died a few years ago so I will never know if he actually had to get into a whaleboat. I will always remember, though, a book that he either brought or sent home that implied he did. The book was entitled “Sailors in Boots” and was a collection of drawings that chronicled the vicissitudes of naval boot camp, something that I would personally experience some ten years later. One drawing showed about 20 recruits hopelessly tangling their oars as they attempted to get a whaleboat away from the pier. It was a funny but not encouraging sight.

I have thought of this picture many times over the years and have come to think of a whaleboat as a metaphor for an organization. In this case, one that has problems getting organized and seems just to make a mess of everything. But a whaleboat can also be a model of organization and efficiency. There are a coxswain and some rowers but, significantly, no passengers. Everyone is doing something, be it right or wrong. Let's use this as the visual expression of **Lyle's Law of Whaleboats: *Steer, row, or stay ashore.***

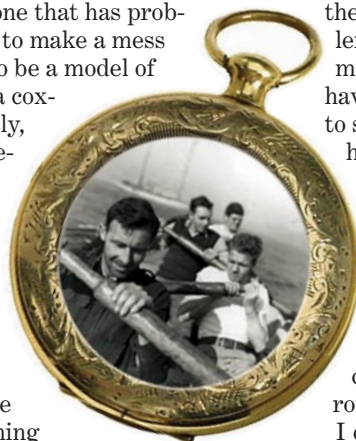
Now, this is a lot like the adage “Lead, follow, or get out of the way” but with a nautical twist. There is a critical difference, however. The act of following is, or at least can be, a passive activity. In contrast, there is no such thing as a passive rower. Rowing is hard work, requiring a considerable amount of effort if the craft is going to make any progress. Furthermore, all the rowers must be synchronized. If one decides to row a little slower or

a little faster or would prefer to set a different course, chaos will reign.

In our jobs, we have probably all known people who seemed to think of themselves as passengers on the company whaleboat. They might be willing to follow, but they have little interest in rowing. They show up every day and do enough to get by, but never really bend their backs to the task. What I find fascinating is that they



Steer, row, or stay ashore.



often don't even realize they are not contributing very much to the success of the company. Indeed, they don't even seem to understand the connection between the company's success and their own (the subject of a future law). If they did, I think they would either get to work or get out.

Advice on this subject was provided by Elbert Hubbard a hundred years ago. He wrote, “If you work for a man, for heaven's sake, work for him ... and stand by the institution he represents”—or go find another place to work. (I should note that Hubbard wrote this at the beginning of the last century and, even though married to a noted suffragist, followed the contemporary standard of using the masculine gender in describing a boss. Having worked for women in the last few years

before I retired, I would have written it differently.)

There are also people who are very hard workers but who work only in their own interest and not in that of their organization. They are probably less prevalent in industry than in academe where faculty members become *de facto* free agents after they have achieved tenure. It takes only one, though, to slow the organization's progress seriously and have it limping along like a whaleboat with all of its rowers pulling hard, but with one who is out of sync with the others.

In addition to the rowers, a whaleboat also has a coxswain. It needs one. It can't have two ... or three ... or any number other than one. The coxswain handles the tiller, determining the direction the boat will go, and also calls the strokes, coordinating the efforts of the rowers.

I don't think I have ever seen an organization that officially had two “coxswains,” but I have seen at least one in which one member tried to run some things independently of the boss. It didn't work. The organization was trying to go in two different

directions and, as a result, went nowhere.

We would all be wise to stop from time to time and consider the various boats in which we are traveling. One of these, of course, is our work. How does it feel? Are you willing to put your back into it? Or do you feel like a passenger? If you are pulling your weight, are you synchronized with the others in your organization and all pulling in the same direction? If you aren't satisfied with the answers to these questions, you probably need to give some serious thought to how to get tuned up—or change boats.

And maybe you're the coxswain. How is your crew doing? Are you

able to provide the leadership that is needed? Remember, this is the 21st century and you aren't a galley master with a drum and a whip and a license to throw overboard anyone who isn't doing so well. You need a more delicate hand on the tiller and a friendly, albeit firm, voice in calling the cadence. You also need an open ear because sometimes a crew member will spot a hazard or an opportunity that you have missed. And you need an open mind, willing to change course if necessary, even if the course change wasn't your idea. In the end, however, you are the one responsible for the direction and distance traveled.

Outside work, most of us are

involved at varying levels in other organizations such as professional societies, churches, civic organizations, or social clubs. I even belong to an investment club and the "Amigos de Español," a group that gets together to speak Spanish. Not all members of such organizations need to be heavily involved, but everyone needs to be at least lightly involved. Everyone needs to pull on an oar, even if some don't dip it very deeply into the water.

So check your boats. Some, you steer. Some, you row. All are taking you somewhere.

—Lyle D. Feisel, Ph.D., P.E.
Iowa Alpha '61

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