



Episode 80 Show Notes: What Leaders Can Learn From NASA's Successes And Failures

Dick Richardson makes a return visit to HR Studio Podcast to discuss his new book, *Apollo Leadership Lessons*. The book is the result of his work in the Apollo Experience Leadership Program that he developed in partnership with NASA, the Smithsonian Institute, the Space Center at Houston, and the Kennedy Space Center to pull together an amazing array of resources for leadership development.

In this episode, Dick draws parallels between the Apollo 11 mission to the Moon and what corporate leaders can learn from NASA about implementing a vision, including acquiring the necessary leadership skills and overcoming human biases that can interfere with success. Dick explains 'perceptual fraction' and how it can be used in leadership development or change initiatives. A key takeaway is the importance of routinely assessing successes and failures to achieve more balanced learning.

Dick is an Executive Leadership Development consultant and the owner and founding partner of Experience to Lead, an organization that offers unique experiences to improve the leadership of individuals, teams, and organizations. Dick has worked with the Conference Board for over 10 years designing and delivering experiential programs for executives. Previously, Dick was an independent consultant and was the Executive Director of Leadership Development at ITT. He also held a variety of leadership positions in Learning at IBM, including global roles based in Hong Kong.

Key Learnings From This Episode

- **What about the Apollo 11 space mission provided rich leadership lessons?** This July marks the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11 landing on the Moon. Dick and his team had run several experiential learning programs related to the Olympics and different battlefields (including Normandy and Gettysburg). NASA was unique in that it was a 10-year mission in the 1960s to get to the Moon. That long-term focus, including its opportunities and challenges, are more aligned with what business leaders face today. Leaders are not typically faced with a 3-day battle. Projects are a longer-term process (e.g., several years) and NASA is more like what modern leaders face today. NASA is also a large, complex organization attempting the impossible, so it is a compelling story.



- **What is a favorite leadership story or lesson?** James Webb was unqualified for his appointment as NASA Administrator, having previously been at the Bureau of the Budget within the Federal Government. He was keenly aware of his lack of aerospace experience and asked himself critically what he needed to learn and change, and what innovation was necessary for the organization to be successful. He created several unique organizational designs that played to his strengths and compensated for his personal weaknesses. Jim was in the role for seven years. The astronauts are recognized and admired for risking their lives and for their exploration, but Jim and his executive team are credited for putting America on the Moon.
- **What is the vision required to accomplish an achievement?** Kennedy gets the credit for setting the vision. Although setting the vision is critical, is it enough? Leaders have kick-off meetings, stating their vision and objectives. However, there are human biases working against them.
 - **Leaders have their own bias.** Leaders are optimistic. They believe once they say something, everyone will understand and buy in. Leaders overestimate themselves and their influence.
 - **Employees have their own biases.**
 - **Confirmation bias** is when employees ask if the vision matches what is going on in their world. Most of the time, by the very nature of change, it does not. When Kennedy said, 'We're going to the Moon', the US had about 15 minutes of experience in space. He really had no right putting out that vision. People thought it was an outlandish idea.
 - **Recency bias** is when people remember, recall and work on things that have most recently happened. A presentation in January with a quick follow up note will quickly fade in people's memory. Leaders need to bring it back to the forefront to make it the most recent thing people remember. Kennedy first spoke with Congress in 1961. The famous Rice speech happened 14 months later ('We choose to go to the Moon' is the famous tagline of a speech about the effort to reach the Moon delivered by Kennedy at Rice Stadium in Houston, Texas in September of 1962). He was still nurturing and renewing that vision, trying to influence and overcome recency bias. It involved selling continuously to constituents to see how this fit with their view of the world, what the benefits were, and getting their buy-in. It was very much like managing stakeholders in business today.



- **What is perceptual fraction, and how does that play out in corporate life and leadership?**

Perceptual fraction is the ‘compared to what?’ question. Are you going to buy a radio that someone offers to you for \$1,000? Probably not, because you are spending \$1,000 vs \$0, which is not favorable. But if you are buying a car for \$60,000, and the salesman offers to add a radio for only \$1,000, you may think that you are already spending \$60,000, so what is an additional \$1,000? Kennedy asked people to spend \$20B+ vs \$0. He told them \$20B was the same amount the US was spending on cigars and cigarettes every day. Would you rather go to the Moon or have a cigar?

- **How can perceptual fraction be used in leadership development or with change initiatives?**

It can be used in relation to an organizational change, such as an acquisition or merger. When you announce a reorganization, look at all the things that are not changing – employee’s salaries, their offices, their managers, their colleagues. The ‘fraction’ is that the organizational structure is going to change but the employees’ daily lives are not going to change, so the fraction is a very favorable one. People are better able to accept change when the change is not as great as initially perceived.

- **Organizations forget about lessons learned.**

Three of the great tragedies of manned space flights, all having fatalities, were Apollo 1 (a fire where 3 astronauts died), Challenger (which blew apart at launch, killing 7 crew members), and Columbia (which broke apart at re-entry, also killing 7 crew members). These tragedies occurred almost exactly 20 years apart, which an actuarial will tell you is a generation. There were lessons learned of Apollo 1. They fixed the organizational problems, brought in new leadership, and put in practices and approaches to make it safer. After a generation, leaders are gone and processes become outdated or are forgotten, and they have to be learned again. In looking at the lessons learned from Challenger and Colombia, they were the same fundamental causes. People forget the lessons learned.



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ROUTINELY LOOK AT SUCCESSES AS MUCH AS FAILURES TO ENSURE MORE CONTINUOUS AND BALANCED LEARNING.

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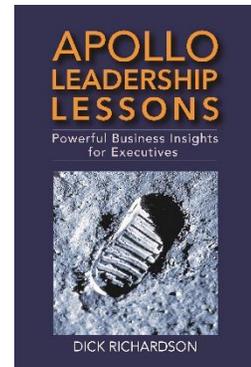
New generations did not experience the joy or heartache of what happened in the past.

- **What did NASA do to embed values in the organization?** They remind people. NASA is a big user of symbolism in their culture. They have mission patches for everything. They are very proud of their missions. For successful missions, there are ceremonies to hang those plaques on the wall. If you look at the most prominent patches in the buildings, they are not the successes. The patches for the successful missions are 16" tall. The patches for the three failed missions hang on the opposite wall, and they are 9ft. tall. It is a remembrance of, 'this is where we forgot our values, this is where we screwed up'. Most companies and schools put their wins in the trophy case. NASA is very good at saying, 'Remember when we failed, and we are never to let that happen again'. When NASA fails, there are human and scientific consequences.
- **How can companies be better at celebrating wins and losses?** NASA debriefs everything. They celebrate every win, but they also go over every failure or close to failure. They are good at pausing themselves, reflecting and reconsidering. Companies rush and move onto the next thing. You need to pause and reflect. What can we learn? Companies make the mistake of superstitious learning. Organizations look more closely at what went wrong and don't also look at successes to understand why they succeeded. They get a biased view of learning from experiences. Make looking at successes as much as failures more routine so you have more continuous and balanced learning.
- **There is a life size poster/cutout in Dick's office of Tim Kopra, a NASA astronaut and friend of Dick's. Is there a story there?** There is a lot of interest around 'flown objects' – objects that have flown in outer space. Tim carried one of Dick's lapel pins to the International Space Station where it spent seven months. That pin has 78 million miles on it! A ceremony was held for Tim for which a life-size poster was created. They were going to throw it away, so Dick asked if he could take it home, where it now hangs proudly.
- **Dick's advice for rising HR leaders.** We can learn from the successes and failures of others. Why did a business succeed or fail? What are they doing that is good and right? What are they doing that predicts they will fail?



Recommended Reading and References From this Episode

- [Apollo Leadership Lessons: Powerful Business Insights for Executives](#) by Dick Richardson
- [Experience To Lead website](#)



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