



Learn from HistorySM

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Train Leaders with a Staff Ride

When a famous commentator once said “Those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it,” he was suggesting that if we don’t learn from the past, we are destined to make the same mistakes. The other side of that same coin is that we will also miss the opportunities to repeat our previous success. By analyzing past events, we can learn both what went right as well as what went wrong. This is particularly true when it comes to learning about leadership. Although technology has brought us many advances over the years, the basic underpinnings of leadership are rooted in human nature which has not changed much over time. Thus, by studying how leaders dealt with challenges in the past, we can prepare current and future leaders to deal with challenges in the future. This is the concept of a Staff Ride - learning from history.

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Since the late 1800's military officers have learned leadership lessons by participating in Staff Rides. What began as training exercises for the German General Staff was later modeled by the US Army as a way to train officers. The Staff Ride is usually conducted in three distinct phases: (1) study of an historical battle, (2) a discussion of what happened and what lessons can be learned from the future, and then (3) an site visit to walk the terrain and understand what happened. When Staff Rides were conducted on European battlefields for the German General Staff, they usually studied battles from the Napoleonic wars. The US Army often utilized battles from the American Civil War as the basis for their Staff Rides. Although the technology of war changed over the years, the concepts of leadership and strategy often remain constant despite more modern weapons and systems. By studying how leaders dealt with the

challenges of the past, it is possible to glean insights for the future. The application of lessons learned can allow leaders to avoid costly mistakes when they find themselves dealing with leadership challenges in the future.

The concept of a Staff Ride has now been expanded. Although the military still uses Staff Rides to train officers, other organizations have now benefited from similar learning exercises. For example, the US Forest Service conducts Staff Rides to train their leaders to fight forest fires and save lives. They use the same basic format: study an historical example, hold a robust discussion, and walk the terrain. By taking future leaders on Staff Rides, they can impart valuable lessons, including some rather difficult lessons about how some fire fighters lost their lives because they failed to take the correct actions while fighting

a wildfire. These are clearly lessons that you want to impart to future leaders so that history does not repeat itself.

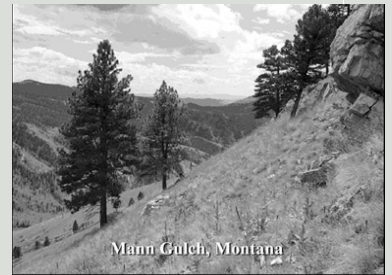
Corporations are now also using Staff Rides to train their leaders. There are valuable lessons that can be learned from history. Business leaders can benefit from using historical examples including studying military history to learn valuable leadership lessons. They can use the same three part format; moreover, with the help of a skilled facilitator, they can also bridge the gap from the lessons learned from history to their application in contemporary business or non-profit settings. Dealing with the basic challenges of leadership, decision making, allocating resources, and overcoming obstacles are but a few of the fundamental challenges for leaders that transcend time and circumstances. Understanding how leaders have dealt with these challenges in the past, even in distinctly different circumstances, provides insights for those who take the time to study how they would deal with similar issues. Then, when they are faced with future challenges, they can fall back on the "decision process" even though the circumstances make be quite different.

In many ways this is the same process used by leading business schools to promote learning through case studies; however, the focus of a Staff Ride is on learning leadership and strategy and not financial decisions. There are lots of fine business schools that can teach the fundamentals of finance and the technical aspects of business; however, leadership is an art that requires thoughtful preparation, reflection, and application. More often than not, a pure academic setting is not the best forum for teaching leadership because it is more one dimensional. Staff Rides go beyond the purely academic discussions to include action learning, active participation, and visiting the historical sites which add an emotional component to the experience.

Thus, a Staff Ride is one way to provide leaders with the opportunity to prepare and reflect on how they would apply lessons from history. The interactive experience of a Staff Ride also provides a more lasting impact that will enhance the learning, make the lessons more memorable, and provide the participants with an opportunity to personalize the learning to their own leadership situation. Perhaps a Staff Ride would benefit you or the leaders in your organization? Go on a Staff Ride and find out for yourself.

Colonel Leonard Kloeber, Jr. is the author of ***Victory Principles: Leadership Lessons from D-Day*** where he uses the WWII story of the D-Day invasion to illustrate universal leadership principles that can be applied to any leadership endeavor. He has extensive "hands-on" experience as a leader in both business and the military and with large and small organizations alike. Most recently he was a senior level human resources executive with a multinational company, but has also worked for start-up and small privately held organizations as well. He lives in Prior Lake, MN. For more information contact him at staffride@gmail.com or visit his website:

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In March 1999, the US Forest Service conducted the "Dude Fire" Staff Ride as part of a national interagency fire behavior workshop in Phoenix, AZ.. With the Dude Fire Staff Ride, they applied the framework of the military Staff Ride to a wild fire that blew up outside of Payson, AZ, in June 1990, killing six firefighters. Before walking the old brushed-over firelines of the Dude Fire, participants were given the raw materials of the fire's history—shift plans, weather forecasts, fire behavior and fire danger predictions, maps, video footage, and photographs. They studied how firefighters behaved during blowups on the Mann Gulch and South Canyon Fires, discussed the events and challenges faced by the firefighters, and walked the terrain. Participants then drew conclusions about "lessons learned." The lessons learned by participants in a Staff Ride are usually individual, personal, not easily categorized, and filled with emotion. The expectation is that individuals will form their own conclusions and then, after talking and listening to other participants, form a shared vision of what happened.