

## Leadership – Survivor Style

Leadership happens everywhere!! At your kitchen table, in your classrooms, during your club meetings, it's everywhere! So you can learn good leadership lessons everywhere, even from some pretty unusual places—in this case, the television show Survivor! So let's talk about Survivor.

Outwit, outplay, outlast, the theme of the hit CBS show, Survivor. While for most of us, eating worms, starting fires with flint stones, and competing for creature comforts like blankets, pillows and matches is a very foreign concept, I have realized in studying leadership and watching the show that we can learn some very important lessons. Tonight, we're going to talk about five lessons we can learn and how adopting some simple leadership practices will make sure that we are not the next member voted off the island.

When you first watch Survivor, you'll see that all of the people competing are forced to join others in a tribe situation within minutes of the game beginning. Our first lesson comes from the tribes, ***“never underestimate the power of strong alliances”***. A strong alliance in the game of Survivor allows you to stay in the game longer because your alliance will not vote you off the island. A strong alliance comes in handy, not only during tribal council, but in real life as well. Strong alliances, or teams, can lighten the work load; can provide creative solutions to problems; can develop innovative new products; and can inspire commitment to a common goal. Not just on Survivor is it necessary to form and work in a team quickly, but in today's rapidly changing society we find ourselves increasingly put into teams to maximize manpower and resources. For all of the adults in the room, how many of you have ever worked in a team at work, or in your volunteering? Of all the youth in the room, how many of you have either worked in a group or on a team in school or in 4-H? The top Fortune 500 Companies are globally diversified and build conglomerate work teams spanning not only cities and states, but countries and continents. Increasingly, your ability to build strong alliances will, just like in the game survivor, help you to stay in the game just that much longer.

Once the new tribe members have a chance to find their new tribal grounds and make themselves at home in their new environment, leaders within the tribes begin to emerge. Sometimes these leaders select themselves because of age, ability or prior expertise. Others emerge naturally because of charisma or some personal characteristic that allows them to rise to the top. However, in each season of the show, we see in the very infancy of the game, those individuals that begin to bark orders at fellow tribe members immediately set themselves on the chopping block for the first tribal council and find themselves voted off the island. We take our second lesson from this emergence of leaders, ***“the leadership style you use should not be the style you abuse”***. The leadership style you chose certainly reflects your own personality and preferences. For some individuals, being very directive is comfortable, while others find it easier to search for harmony and consensus among team members. In one particular season, one of the individuals playing the game was a scout master. Now, this lady knew a lot of stuff about camping, fishing, making fire and surviving in uncomfortable conditions. As soon as the

newly formed tribe made it to their camp, she began telling everyone, pretty forcefully, everything she knew about scouting and how to start the fire, catch the fish and build the shelter. Her information was invaluable to her tribe mates, especially since she knew how to use the flint. Unfortunately, her method of delivery left her message falling on deaf ears, and she quickly found herself at odds with the others, on the chopping block at tribal council and out of the game. Whatever style you adopt, remember, the teams in which you interact depend on you to lead and inspire. But in leading and inspiring, there is no room for abuse of power, and should you do so, your own tribal council could be just around the corner.

Another place where we can learn from the Survivor contestants is during the quests for immunity. In the beginning of the game, the tribes play as teams for immunity from tribal council. At the end of the game, when the stakes are higher and the million dollar prize looms closer, players play for immunity as individuals. We can learn a lot from the players during the immunity challenges. The lesson here has to be, ***“never give up, never give in, keep playing, you never know when it will pay off”***. In last season’s Survivor All Stars, I remember an episode where the eventual second place finisher “Boston” Rob Mariano was competing for immunity against his former friend Lex Van den Burg. Lex was far out in front of this swimming competition, and going strong. Rob was struggling, behind by several minutes. But Rob never quit trying, even when he would look up and see Lex far out in front, he kept competing as though they were neck and neck. At the last hurdle, Lex got stuck. Because Rob never gave up, he was not only able to close the gap, he was able to pass Lex and win the coveted immunity, saving him from what he knew would be a tribal council that was set to not go his way. In our own lives, it sometimes seems that giving up would just be easier than to continue the struggle to lead. Leadership, after all, isn’t easy. But no one ever said it would be. In continuing the struggle to better ourselves as leaders, we too should never give up, never give in and keep trying to strive to be the best leaders that we can be. You never know what reward might be right around the corner, and how continuing the struggle might help us stay in the game.

If you watch Survivor for any length of time, you quickly learn that for food and other rewards, the contestants are put into challenges. At the beginning of the game, tribes play as a group competing against each other. Towards the end of the game, individuals play for the rewards. Many times, the winner of those individual rewards can select other players to enjoy the reward with them. Our next lesson comes from those reward challenges, ***“never forget the people who helped you to get where you are”***. In life, as in the game Survivor, you can not move forward without the help of others, remember we already talked about those strong alliances. Several years ago, there was a study done with individuals who had chosen to discontinue long time support of a youth program. When asked why, they said it was because they didn’t feel like their efforts were appreciated. As leaders, we cannot lead without followers. As managers, we cannot program without the people who help us carry out those programs. As educators, we tell our young people that individuals who give of their time, talents, and money do so because they believe in the value of youth programs. Without support there would be no

programs that work to engage young people and give them the tools they need to be successful later on in life.

We have alluded to it all night; it is the one event in the game of Survivor that everyone dreads, Tribal Council. It's the place where all grievances are aired either verbally or in the votes. But tonight, instead of taking a lesson from all of the tribal councils where someone is being voted off, I decided to instead think about the tribal councils where someone is being voted FOR, the tribal councils where the final \$1 million prize is awarded. Contestants on the show who get voted off along the way, often talk about the life changing experience it is to be on the show. Individuals talk about how their experiences on Survivor helped them to renew the relationships within their family, gave them a sense of appreciating diversity and other cultures, taught them self reliance or gave them a greater sense of self-confidence. Leadership is no different. In the game of Survivor the rewards are great if you make it to the end. In the game of leadership however, the rewards are not necessarily at the end of the game, but along the way. My last Leadership: Survivor lesson is this, "***enjoy the journey as much as the destination***". If you work with youth programs, it won't be long before you begin to hear stories about different programs, those that go well, and those that were a challenge. The neatest thing about hearing those leadership moments is this: each individual I talk to, talks about the young person they have watched grow up, maybe since they were very young, into a confident teen leader. Maybe it's about watching a young person trying out something new and finding success. Or maybe it's about discovering a hidden talent or ambition within a young person you never knew and watching them grow into someone special. While the destination in each of those scenarios is great, the journey is spectacular! Being a great leader is about appreciating the journey.

Five simple leadership lessons found in a hit television show, who knew?

1. ***never underestimate the power of strong alliances***
2. ***the leadership style you use should not be the style you abuse***
3. ***never give up, never give in, keep playing, you never know when it will pay off***
4. ***never forget the people who helped you to get where you are***
5. ***enjoy the journey as much as the destination***

How can you apply these leadership lessons in your life?