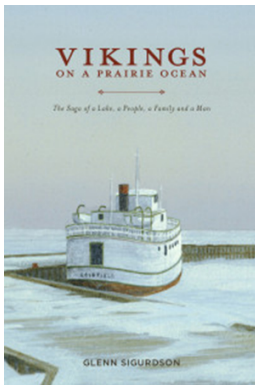


The Best Leaders Lead Without Owning

P178 in *Vikings On A Prairie Ocean* by Glenn Sigurdson



Keeping the fish fresh was a constant concern, on the water and off. As the boxes came out from the icehouses ready for transport, every cover was lifted and another shovel of ice tossed in. If they needed to hold the fish at the station due to bad weather, they were at risk for all they had bought. Dad spent half the day sometimes making sure the men took ice out onto the lake. The last thing he wanted was for the product to be beaten up by the sun. The first sign of deterioration is a softening of the flesh, and when bones were visible, sticking out through the flesh, the men would slide those fish straight off the dressing table into the gut barrel. Dad was in constant communication with the boats, stations and suppliers. Just monitoring how much fish was coming in so they'd know how much room they would need in the tugs was a major undertaking. And half the time Dad oversaw all this from a boat in rough weather with frequent breakdowns and two-way radio interruptions.

In the summer, unlike the winter, while individual fishermen operated independently, they were highly dependent on the “packer” companies, called such because they bought and packed the fish to be sold to the larger companies for export into the US markets. The packer companies typically owned the boats and equipment, especially the big whitefish boats, and rented them to the fishermen. They would provision and supply on credit everything needed for the operation, from gas to food. Accounts were settled at the end of each season.

This dependency grew alongside the gradual decline of the fishery, with the fishermen caught in the grip of diminishing fish receipts and increasing operation costs. The packer companies supplying exporters were in turn tangled in the vagaries of Chicago and New York markets, grinding away to maintain their margins, bearing the brunt of the risk on the downside, but not enjoying the benefits of the big swings in prices on the upside. The exporters had their own challenges, as they were vulnerable to the influence of a few buyers who controlled the markets. This collage of interests gurgled over the next few decades, morphing from an uneasy soup to a witch's brew of ever-fewer fish, puzzling prices and an uncertain future.

The toughest time for Dad was settling accounts with men who had nothing left on the table after the season. He had to take back literally everything they owned, and perhaps not even issue a meagre cheque in return. Days when that happened were not easy for Dad.

Dad was versatile enough to take care of it all. He had to be able to connect to prominent businessmen (he wore his suit then), and he needed to connect to the people who ultimately drove his business, the men from whom he bought his fish (no suit then). He brokered a conversation between many different people, all of whom needed each other. He wasn't so much a middleman as a man in the middle, immersed in many different realities. He moved in a comfortable way with many different people.

Every day Dad faced this enormous web of pressures, including the complex interactions among the powerful personalities of the Sig Fish partners. Nothing happened at Sig Fish until everyone was aboard, with one mind and one voice, but before that place was reached there was, inevitably, a lot of talk. Plus he had his own family to look out for!

Somehow it all hung together, and I think I know one of the most important reasons why ... he treated everyone with respect. He needed to, because in a business as complex as he was running, he couldn't afford to create problems. But it was deeper than that. No man or woman was ever different in his eyes—he was a genuinely “colour blind” man. He just didn't see differences in value in other human beings. He was never in your face—he always left space for other people and other perspectives. To be sure, he had a strong and determined will, but he always left room for others to help shape his actions. He was not judgmental, but rather, profoundly accepting of people's strengths and foibles. He was unswervingly loyal, and constantly vigilant not to betray who he was by overlooking someone in a way they could see as hurtful. He was a gentle man, a good man, but not a man who asked for or expected that endorsement.

Some men purposefully figure out how to be leaders. They work hard to gain influence, spend their energy gathering the trappings of power. They don't worry about stepping on people who get in their way—“that's just business.” But there's another type of leader, a natural leader, who commands respect by giving respect. Everyone is important to these leaders and they believe they get what they give. They accept people for who they are, seeing right past weaknesses to strengths. They have power, but are seemingly indifferent to wielding it. And they don't focus on doing one huge thing, at any cost, but on doing a million small things at no cost, because they're good things to do.

Dad was a natural leader. Actually, many of the men in my family were. The risk of someone thinking it arrogant to say so is far outweighed by the injustice of not saying it. The kindest people should get their due. Anyone would understand if they could look into my dad's eyes, be touched by their warm and open confidence. He didn't need to be anything. He just needed to be. Dad was never in the business of transforming people. He accepted them for who they were. His was a tough business, operated in tough places, run by tough men. There was a lot of heavy drinking. In all Dad's years on the lake, walking into the middle of difficult situations and drunken fishermen, no man ever took a hand to him, or even tried. Nor did he lose a dollar, for what was owed one year was always repaid some later year. The men and women with Sig Fish were there season after season, for a lifetime.