



*Leadership Concept Series*

## **The Seduction of Victory**

Excerpted from:

### ***It Comes Down to This***

*Leadership, Management, and Getting from Here to There*

*By Chris Kaufman*

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### **AOL and the Arrogance of Victory – A Story**

In mid-2002 America Online (AOL) had a U.S. subscription base of about 27 million. In mid-2009 it had about 6 million. If you do the math, that is over 77% decline in business. In 2002, AOL was the big boy on the block; the guy with all the muscle and the sex appeal. It was successful and powerful in an incredibly volatile and rapidly changing industry space. It was also highly arrogant, extremely difficult to work with as a customer, and clunky to use. AOL rode a wave of first-to-market and climbed a crest of glory that allowed an upstart, just ten years old to take over venerable Time-Warner. But for some reason, it failed to notice, the very thing that had made it successful, locking up the position of “Internet Kindergarten” laid the foundation of its own demise. If you are painful to work with, you have clunky proprietary tools, and you are arrogant about your position, you can count on your decline being rapid and embarrassing. They were seduced.

### **The Doolittle Raid and Strategy in the Pacific – A Story**

On April 18, 1942, Colonel Jimmy Doolittle rumbled off the flight deck of the USS Hornet leading 16 B-25B Mitchell Bombers on a bombing run over Tokyo. It was the first time the United States had attacked the Japanese homeland since the bombing of Pearl Harbor. It was incredibly brave though it did little damage to Tokyo and none to the Japanese war machine. However, it accomplished exactly what it was supposed to. U.S. and allied morale got a shot in the arm. There was consternation amongst the Japanese military hierarchy. Japan extended its defensive lines to include the Midway Archipelago, which laid the groundwork for the Battle of Midway where the U.S. destroyed enough of the Japanese Fleet to change the course of the war. Ernest King (Commander in Chief, United States Fleet) and Chester Nimitz (Commander in Chief, United States Pacific Fleet) were both aware of the value and context of the Doolittle Raid. They kept their distance, their perspective, and they looked at their strategic and tactical maps more than headlines. They were not seduced.

## **Operation Mincemeat and the Invasion of Sicily – A Story**

On April 19, 1943, the body of a British Royal Marine courier with a briefcase chained to his belt washed ashore near the Spanish town of Huelva. The case contained personal letters between high ranking British officers which included enough oblique references to coming actions to allow a careful reader to connect the dots and figure out the Allied plans for the Mediterranean assault on Europe. Huelva was brimming with careful readers. Before neutral Spain returned the documents to the British, they were given to the German spy network for one hour to be photographed. The copies were sent to Berlin where they were accepted as valid with little more than cursory investigation. The documents were accepted all the way up to Hitler. It was all a fake. The documents had been created and planted on a corpse which was set adrift by a submarine crew just off the shore of Spain in the hopes it would wash up and be discovered by the right people. It was. As a result, German forces were concentrated in the Balkans and Greece when the Allies invaded Sicily. The Germans thought they had scored an historic coup over the Brits and displayed a willingness to believe which prevented them from conducting even the most basic validation protocols. Unforgivable sloppiness and towering desire for the information to be true probably saved the lives of thousands of British and American troops. The Nazis were seduced.

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## **The Aftermath of Victory**

Victory is a fleeting moment in time. The real value of a victory is in the effort that secures its achievement, not in the moment it is declared. In many ways it is like being a little kid waiting for Christmas. At some point in our lives we come to realize the joy of Christmas is the month leading up to it. The day itself comes and goes pretty quickly. As John Lennon supposedly said: “Life is what happens while you are busy making other plans.” Success is what happens when you straining to achieve the victory, not when they hand you the medal.

We get seduced by victories in a number of ways. The seduction of victory happens when we begin to think of victory as a state of being, not something we are in the process of reaching.

## **Big Victory**

The seduction of a big victory is most often seen in an arrogance that does not recognize the fleeting nature of a win. We have a tendency to translate past success into the expectation of a future success. In ancient Rome, a small number of generals were granted the highest honor in recognition of a victory, the Triumph. Only for a Triumph was a general allowed to set foot in Rome as a military commander. Otherwise he lost his command the moment he passed through a city gate. For a Triumph the general was painted red to resemble statues of Jupiter and rode in a chariot at the head of his army. Wagons carrying the spoils of his victory went before and behind him. Defeated leaders walked in chains. The procession travelled from the gates of Rome to the center of the city, the Forum. At Capitoline Hill he climbed the steps to the Temple

of Jupiter on his knees and sacrificed to the god. It was the epitome of achievement for any general and was seldom granted by the Senate. But even in the moment of supreme recognition and triumph, the general was reminded of the fleeting nature of his accomplishment. A slave stood behind him and held a golden crown over his head. Every few minutes the slave would whisper into the general's ear: "Remember, you are only mortal." It was a warning against arrogance and complacency.

If the expectation of future success is turned inward and results in a mindset that drives you to do what is necessary to achieve ongoing success, you are crossing the threshold to becoming a winning culture with consistent winning dynamics. Victory is a pivot and launching point for the next level of success. It should be a forward looking mindset rather than a time to rest on our laurels.

If, on the other hand, the victory is a point where you stop and relax, you will find you are quickly sliding back down the slope. Teams that play up consistently improve. Teams that are stronger than their opponents tend to lose their edge. There really is something in the old Avis catch phrase: "We're Number Two but We Try Harder."

In the military there is a name for this: *Victory Disease*. Basically it means an outfit has become arrogant and smug due to a history of victory and this leads to a decline in effort and focus combined with an assumption victory will be theirs. Defeat, often disastrous defeat, follows.

Companies in the third generation of management are often victim to the seduction of victory and the assumption of success. The founding generation has the vision and drive to take the organization to success. They understood the level of constant work and discipline required and they behaved accordingly. The second generation has often worked with the founding generation and although they may not have the clarity of vision of the founders, they understand the need for hard work, focus, and the continual pressure necessary for success. The third generation has grown up in an environment of success and frequently lacks both the vision and the understanding of what it takes to repeat and assure winning. Success has been a state of life rather than an earned achievement. With notable exceptions, (e.g. Nordstrom, Ford) this is why nepotism is frowned upon in modern business. Birth is seldom a valid qualification for effective leadership or success.

## Small Victories

Small victories can be stepping stones and morale boosters. They keep interest and hope alive. If managed well, small victories can highlight accomplishments on the path to major success and they can be the proving ground of an organization's ability to make progress in a consistent and predictable fashion. They can also be your enemy.

The challenge for many executives and managers is keeping small victories in their proper context and perspective. It is tempting to focus on the victory in a battle to the exclusion of winning the war. Interim victories give you something to talk about and focus on. They are often necessary milestones and indicators of progress. They fill empty space in a board meeting. The questions to ask are these:

- *Is this victory leading to the greater victory?*
- *Will this victory misdirect our focus from what really needs to get done?*

A great marketing plan that wins awards but does not translate into sales is misdirection. Reducing expenses may slow the bleeding but is only part of your success. Becoming ISO9000 certified tells the world you have consistent quality, not that you have a good product. Great processes are simply predictable motions if they do not produce results.

Small victories can be constructive or destructive depending on how you use them as a manager and a leader.

## **Misguided Credit**

People involved in very successful organizations often imbue themselves with credit for that success. This is especially true if they become beneficiaries of the success. It should be said, there is a legitimate and deserved element of pride in being part of a team that achieved a notable success. Legitimate bragging rights, however, should not be confused with being the architect of the victory. Typically, a small percentage of a successful team is responsible for the vision and design of the success. The rest of the team may have worked very hard in the execution of that design. But they should not confuse hard work with being responsible for the victory. Tech millionaires no doubt worked very hard for their respective organizations. So bank clerks. Most of the tech millionaires were simply in the right place at the right time.

Remember this as you separate fact from fiction after a victory. Being close to a victory and benefiting from that victory does not mean you made it happen. If you are lucky enough to have a big stock option or exit strategy payday because of a bubbling economy or an optimistic stock market; that is great. But do not take credit for building the railroad if you simply hopped on the train.

Most importantly, if your success was caused by things outside your control, do not make your plans based on the assumption it will happen again.

## **The Upshot Is . . .**

Do not be seduced by victories, big or small; they are fleeting moments in time and often the beginning of a downward cycle. Remember: the value in victory is in the striving.

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# *Agovia*

*Manage to Success*

At Agovia Consulting we work with leadership teams who have made the decision to do what is necessary to succeed. Our focus is the whole business and the organization rather than any single element. In order to succeed, it is necessary to have results in all the areas of your business, not only your area of core expertise. We help organizations take control and manage their path to the future with common-sense planning and governance mechanisms that work. We help you focus on the three primary leverage points of all successful organizations:

*Identity*  
*Definition of Success*  
*Current State*

Using the fundamentals of management, planning, execution, and leadership, we work together to design the path to success. We work with you to decide what it will take to succeed and we decide how to do it.

Failure in business (whether for-profit or nonprofit) almost always occurs outside the core and essence of the enterprise. Most businesses have a high degree of core competence. They are pretty good at what they do, whether it is making bread, issuing insurance policies, or manufacturing computers. Most failures occur in the management structures surrounding the core business.

Agovia Consulting works primarily with the leadership teams of organizations, from the enterprise-level to the department level. If the leadership team can gather around a table, we can hammer out who we are, where we are going, and how to get there.

If you are stuck or feel caught in the grip of inertia, whether your company or your program, we can help you get perspective, establish structure, and get moving again. A firm decision to succeed is the most important ingredient. Once you have the commitment, together we can find a way to make it happen.

*We listen*  
*We pay attention*  
*We work with you*



