

# THE MOUNT · VERNON · REPORT

“Issues Affecting Reputation Management and Strategic Communication”

## Lewis and Clark Bicentennial: Business Lessons From Early Explorers

These days, we can fly from New York to Portland, Oregon, in an afternoon. Because we take this for granted and the fact that our surroundings may be so far away and yet so familiar to us, it is difficult to imagine what it was like 200 years ago when Meriwether Lewis and William Clark set out with their “Corps of Discovery” to stake a claim for this same span of land.

In 1803, when Thomas Jefferson commissioned the Corps, the population in the United States was primarily found within 50 miles of the Atlantic Ocean. The Mississippi River formed the western boundary of the U.S. The timing of the excursion was crucial – a still-young America was competing with Spain and Great Britain for the land west of the Mississippi. Now, in the bicentennial year of this expedition, the land through the Rocky Mountains has been

traversed so often that it no longer seems to take courage to get from sea to shining sea.

The extreme bravery of Lewis and Clark holds lessons applicable to success in business today. With appropriate planning, the two men’s quest into the unknown did not become easy, but easier. Before the men left on their journey, Lewis had worked closely with Thomas Jefferson, giving him ample time to understand the expectations of his project. This empowered Lewis to make suitable decisions throughout the journey when communication with the President was all but impossible. The two dedicated themselves to anticipating what could lie ahead; both Lewis and Clark spent time studying the sciences and map-making to educate themselves for what they might encounter. Lewis and Clark provide an excellent example of seeking out appropriate partners and

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### Bravery and Reputation

Fifty years ago, New Zealander Edmund Hillary and Tibetan Tenzing Norgay scaled Mount Everest. Both were humble people, not fame seekers, and simply set out to do what many said could not be done – climb to the top of the world.

Great climbers before them had tried before and paid for mistakes with their lives. Hillary and Norgay planned for risk, but no amount of planning ever fully removes the pit of anxiety and fear that comes with setting out on a great endeavor. Hillary and Norgay went on to live celebrated lives, their fame less for personal gain and more for becoming living examples of what could be achieved when fear can be channeled to propel a larger purpose.

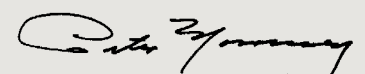
Few of us will ever get the chance to experience life-defining moments of adventure and risk such as these. The courage most of us call upon within ourselves each day is far less glamorous, and our bravery manifests itself in quieter ways.

Taking a chance by hiring a new executive or launching a marketing campaign amidst the uncertainty of the down

economy; abandoning safe, over-used academic approaches to find innovative new solutions to old business challenges – these are the courageous choices that make or break corporate reputation. Corporations unfamiliar with courage become mired in the paralysis of paranoid caution. The optimist looks at a risk and says, “What’s the worst thing that could happen?” The pessimist tells himself the worst thing will certainly happen. Whether you think you can or think you can’t, you’re probably right,” Henry Ford once said.

This issue of *The Mount Vernon Report* pays tribute to those who think they can, and attempts to extract the relevant business lessons of uncommon and unheralded courage.

Bravery cannot occur without risk. Organizations, like people, develop reputations for doing brave things by doing the right thing rather than following the path of convenience. They become revered because of those brief moments when they say “Yes,” or even “Maybe,” instead of “No” to a challenge.



## For Business, Honesty is the Most Courageous Policy

The act of telling the truth – admitting mistakes and acknowledging financial losses – became a lost art during the boom years of the 1990s and into the new century. In an era when the daily movements of the Nasdaq and Dow were followed like baseball box scores, some now-infamous companies employed tricks and smoke and mirrors to cook the books.

But that may be changing.

Until recently, matching or beating Thompson Financial's First Call consensus earnings estimates came to be the single most watched measure of corporate success. The focus on quarterly earnings targets helped create the environments that led to the catastrophes at Enron, WorldCom and elsewhere.

Leave it to celebrated investor Warren Buffett to lead the way with a dose of corporate bravery.

Buffett has long been a critic of corporate earnings forecasts. Last December, Coca-Cola, of which Buffett is the largest shareholder, surprised the world by announcing that it was not providing earnings guidance for the first quarter of 2003.

Other Buffett-invested companies had blazed that trail before – The Washington Post Company and others. But Coke's announcement was a surprise.

Other major companies followed, including Seattle insurance company Safeco, Pepsico, and fast food leader McDonald's.

In the late 1990s, Buffett was criticized as being “behind the times.” Avoiding the high-flying tech stocks, Buffett stuck to “old economy” stocks like Coke, Gillette and others. *Fortune magazine* said in December 1999 that, “Buffett may be losing his magic touch.”

At the time, Buffett even used his annual Berkshire Hathaway shareholder letter to warn against accounting tricks, overpriced stocks and the dangers of regular earnings forecasts.

Buffett's beliefs and statements have proven right. Buffett had the courage of his convictions and communicated them regularly. Since then his reputation as a corporate business legend has been enhanced.

Being honest and sticking to convictions in communications is the best policy for business. It may take some bravery, but it also may hold a longer-term payoff for your company's reputation.

~ John Lamontagne

## Buck O'Neil, A Model of Bravery Pulled From Baseball's Past

A smooth-fielding line drive hitter in the Negro League, John Jordan “Buck” O'Neil confronted a crisis.

It was the early 1930s, a time when baseball was played with a racial barrier as high as the Empire State Building and as wide as the Mississippi River. It was a period in America when only white men hit major league homeruns. The thought of black men crossing home plate was considered radical.

A segregated America denied Buck O'Neil the chance to play Major League Baseball. Instead of backing down from the challenge, O'Neil showcased his skills as a first baseman with the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro League. Following his Monarch career, Buck moved on to Major League Baseball as a scout with the Chicago Cubs, where he was credited with signing Hall of Famers Ernie Banks and Lou Brock.

Later, in 1962, he broke the race barrier by becoming the first black coach in the history of baseball with the Chicago Cubs – 15 years after Jackie Robinson became the first black ballplayer. O'Neil went against society's normal values and demonstrated that good leaders become great leaders through bravery and courage.

But it wasn't his experience with a bat or glove that made him so successful. It was his bravery in the face of personal and professional challenges, and his ability to apply the lessons he learned.

Today, despite an earlier generation's refusal to recognize him, O'Neil is considered a legend of the game.

As examples from the world of sports often do, O'Neil's situation fosters a sense of identification that parallels history, politics and business. Just as bravery played an integral part in O'Neil's life of determination and talent, it is also sown into the fabric of successful leaders in the corporate world.

Leadership demands bravery. Business leaders cannot be afraid to be innovative or different during resistant times. When the world today cries out for leadership, following the herd is a sure path to mediocrity. Propelling ourselves to go beyond our comfort zone is the first step to becoming a courageous leader. Buck O'Neil was one person that used bravery to ignite leadership when faced with broad and deep resistance.

~ Tyler Tumminia

## Leadership Demands Bravery: An Interview with Buck O'Neil

Today, at 92 years old, Buck O'Neil does not consider himself brave. He prefers the word "determined." He still has an infectious smile, a strong handshake and a force of personality that seems to energize everyone with whom he comes into contact. He spoke with *The Mount Vernon Report* about his experience.

### Do you view yourself as someone who is brave?

No, no, no. I do not think myself as brave at all.

### What was the key to your success in life?

My parents and grandparents were the key to my success, and of course Emma Booker, my principal at the elementary school I went to in Sarasota, Florida.

### Who was your hero?

You have many different heroes as you pass through different stages in your life. My first hero is my father, John O'Neil – 6'4" 240 lbs of beautiful flesh. He was quite a man, my first hero. Then, Jackie Robinson, because he was a leader. A hero is someone that does good things, like Martin Luther King. As you climb the ladder, you will have different heroes.

### Did environment play a role in your success?

Yes, my environment had a role in my career. I belonged to the Negro League, which back then was the third largest black-owned business in the country. Education played an important part in my career. You see, 40 percent of the Negro players went to college. They would go to school in the winter and then join the team to play...Education is very important. It's a foundation.

### What was your reaction to becoming baseball's first black coach?

You see, I had been doing this all the time. I played and scouted and then became the first black coach in Major League Baseball. See? It's bittersweet in the sense that I went from traveling and putting in all these miles in a car and then I went to flying in planes and riding trains, and making more money. The bitter part was that baseball had been in existence for 75 years



**Don't feel bad for the black player, Feel sorry for the ones who didn't get to see them play.**  
- Buck O'Neil

I couldn't go wrong. Love was the key. It's not hard for me to love people. You can be the best that you can be. If you can say that I'm being the best that I can be; that's all that anybody cares about anyway. You got to be prepared. If you study, it's easy to do the right thing. You know what it takes to do your job and you might add something to your job. But learn, study, and be prepared. See? Intelligence. You can't beat it!

### Do you feel that baseball is still a way out?

Yes, sports are a way out. You can get a free college education with sports these days. You have to think of the people before you, like your grandparents. There is more opportunity now than before. Opportunities are there but you have to be prepared. Don't waste it. Learn it.

### Is there a ballplayer today that reminds you of yourself?

These players are much faster and quicker than I was. It's so different now. The greatest athletes that ever lived are living now. They are supposed to be better.

~ Tyler Tumminia

**“ THIS TYPE OF PREPARATION CREATES BUSINESS LEADERS WHO REMAIN DAUNTLESS AS THEY PROVE AND MAINTAIN THEIR BUSINESS’ REPUTATION. ”**

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counsel along the way. Partway through the expedition, the Corps met Sacajawea, a Shoshone Indian woman. She became an integral part of the expedition, relied upon for guidance in finding edible plants, assistance in understanding the terrain, and translation among other Native American tribes. Planning for success did not make the expedition any less courageous; instead, it empowered them to achieve their goals.

For Lewis and Clark, the territory was unfamiliar, the natural elements seemed to put up barrier after barrier, and the length and complexity of the journey tested the group’s ingenuity.

These hurdles are analogous to those felt by business leaders throughout history. The 28-month expedition tested the party’s determination and courage, as the Corps recorded new flora, fauna and weather patterns and negotiated their way through numerous encounters to reach the Pacific Ocean. Lewis found himself able to make decisions that allowed the Corps to move forward, and the studying the men had done paid off as the pair identified new plant and animal specimens and drew the very first maps of the area. Their preparation enabled the success of the journey – and allowed the Corps to bravely face the challenges put before them – giving them a sturdy legacy that has lasted more than 200 years.

Lewis and Clark are not the only entrepreneurs celebrating anniversaries this year. Many of 2003’s milestones were not even conceived 200 years ago. Today, we dream about our favorite cars – Ford or otherwise, pick up a pint of one of Ben & Jerry’s 50 flavors, order age-fighting products from Mary Kay, or peruse the latest issue of Black Enterprise on any newsstand without a second thought.

And, as difficult as it is to imagine what it was like for these entrepreneurs, they too faced obstacles when starting their businesses. These businesspeople acquired their reputations not just because they were ultimately successful but because they took brave steps to start down the path of success.

Henry Ford took a chance with the horseless carriage 100 years ago. Ben Cohen & Jerry Greenfield made a significant commitment to their employees and the environment, something that is still considered different 25 years later. Mary Kay retired after 25 years in corporate sales and a month later took all that she had learned to open her own business – Mary Kay Cosmetics – which, after 40 years, is still one of the largest direct sellers of skin care products. Earl Graves founded Earl Graves, Ltd., 35 years ago in 1968. Today, the organization’s magazine, Black Enterprise, reaches more than four million readers and is regarded as an essential source of information for African-American business leaders.

Today, our preparation for a coast-to-coast trip often begins and ends with purchasing a plane ticket and renting a car. Many of us regularly travel in planes and automobiles, rarely worrying about the language we will speak, the amenities at our next stop, or the effects of the weather during our journeys.

However, while we now have the luxury of traveling on a whim, we need to remember that careful groundwork will benefit our businesses. We should prepare our business moves thoroughly, understanding the expectations put before us, educating ourselves in our industries, and seeking out appropriate help along the way. This type of preparation creates business leaders who remain dauntless as they prove and maintain their business’ reputation.

For Lewis and Clark, the unknowns may have seemed insurmountable, but the Corps of Discovery had the advantage of their leaders’ thoughtful preparation, taking one step at a time, finding their way across a vast, uncharted land, and back. In an era when we have the wherewithal and technical resources to perform beyond Lewis’ and Clark’s imaginations, applying the simple lessons from such an unprecedented and treacherous journey will propel us beyond any level we imagine today, and assure that our good reputations remain intact.

~ Angela Murdough

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