



Susan

You may never have heard of Susan because she never got massive media coverage, at least not here in South Carolina. Her legacy as a leader is not on the magnitude of Jack Welch or Bill Gates. But as a leader in her own unique way, she made a huge impact – as a mother (two daughters), as a wife, and as a businesswoman and sportswoman.

Susan was born in 1954 into an upper-middle-class family in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At the age of eight she wrote two short sentences that would shape her life: “I hate the city. I love the country.”

At the age of 15 she realized that she had no role models or mentors to guide her. Even at this tender age she knew that she would have to set her own path. She didn’t know exactly what she wanted to do, but she knew the types of things, and was determined not to let people or places get in her way.

Being dyslexic, she had trouble in school. At the age of 17 she turned her back on “civilization” and headed west to Colorado to pursue her passion. Three years later she made her last, but most significant move.

Susan went into business and along the way, like a lot of entrepreneurs in uncharted territory, flirted with bankruptcy, loneliness, and 18-hour days doing menial jobs to finance her dream. She struggled for years.

Knowing that the key to success was in assembling the right team, Susan started building her own, slowly at first. She developed them and coached them and was able, through them, to rise to the very top of her chosen profession. Some of her thoughts on teams follow. (Do you as a leader think in the same terms about your team?)

- “Of foremost interest is the trust I develop with them.”
- “I enhance a winning spirit in my team.”
- “My team members don’t have to be the most gifted. I am looking for heart.”
- “They are my friends, my family, and my workmates. Our relationship is extremely close.”
- “They need training until the time they retire.”
- “We work together as a team on a daily basis. My team is my livelihood.”
- “The most important thing is that you are working with 12, 16, 20 best friends. I have trained

them. I know each personality. I know what they are thinking. I can see the work we have all put together to make this team perform.”

Susan started to see some success in her male-dominated field. Some of the men conspired against her. That just made her more determined to succeed where women had not gone before. “I do not know the word ‘quit’,” she said. “Either I never did or I abolished it.”

And she was constantly changing, tweaking, searching for an edge: “Advances are being made very rapidly, and there are not books to read; we cannot find out what the next move is. I always have to figure out new methods.”

Susan Butcher was a musher, a dog sled racer. Her team, Alaskan Huskies. She won the famous Alaskan Iditarod four times. This race is arguably the most difficult and arduous test of will and endurance on earth, a balancing act of survival and competition.

The temperatures plunge to minus 50 degrees. There are Arctic blizzards, avalanches, winds across the frozen tundra up to 100 mph, hallucinations from averaging 2 hours of sleep per day. The race is 1,152 miles over 10 days through some of the most spectacular, but inhospitable, terrain on the planet. You can fall through thin ice across rivers and be attacked by marauding wild animals. Susan, in the lead for her first win in 1985, was attacked by a moose. She fought off the crazed animal with an axe, but the moose stomped two of her dogs to death and injured 13 others, forcing her out of the race after training 11-and-a-half months, seven days a week.

Most people would have given up, their spirit extinguished by incredible bad luck. Not Susan Butcher. She rebuilt her team, trained harder, and came back the next year to win her first of four titles, a feat only one man has equaled.

“My goal,” she said, “was not to be the first woman or the best woman. It was to be the best dog sled racer.”

In my research (Google has an Alaskan mountain of information on Susan Butcher), I never read a single negative comment about her. The men who once disliked her for invading “their space” became her biggest admirers. They came to know she was a special breed, a larger-than-life competitor who earned it the hard way – the Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods of her profession. With much admiration they called her the “best competitive dog sled racer in the universe” and the “toughest dog on the team.”

In early 2005 Susan Butcher was diagnosed with leukemia. She fought the good fight and when all seemed lost, agreed to try some new experimental drugs. The doctors thought she had miraculously won another race. She hadn’t. This woman of indomitable spirit and magnificent passion, this lover and protector of nature, this unabashed fan of her team, died August 5, 2006, in Seattle, far from the land and team she loved. She was just 51.

Susan is a hero, a role model (especially for young women), and an inspiration to all those who knew her, and to all those who knew her reputation. The comment she made on the winner’s stand after winning one of her Iditarods is my favorite: “I don’t want to talk about this year’s race. It’s over. I’ve won it. Let’s talk about next year’s race. I’m coming back to win it again.”

Leadership Challenge

Find your passion and go for it. For sure, most of us are at a stage in life where we can’t chuck everything and go to Alaska to be a musher. But maybe we can pick up a hobby that we let slide and rekindle our spirit. Maybe it’s volunteer work or going back to the local university to take a course in whatever. Or, how about that idea of starting a small business? One of the saddest comments that I hear often is, “I wish I had done.....”

Find your passion.

My second challenge to you is to talk to a son or daughter, or grandchild, about their passion and encourage them to pursue something greater than themselves, to not let criticism or fear of failure deter them from trying. Sometimes all it takes is an encouraging word from someone they respect to give them the confidence to proceed.

My last challenge is to go back and read what Susan Butcher said about her teams, and see if we can gain some insight into how we might approach our teams a little differently. MUSH ON!



I encourage your response to these thoughts. farlgroup@aol.com

Have a great day!

Please forward this on or send us the e-mail addresses of co-workers, friends or family members who might enjoy a monthly leadership thought.