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# Alternative Learning—*Wizard of Oz* Style

by Larry Jackson

I'm a firm believer that you can learn professional and life lessons from almost anything and anyone if you just pay attention, keep an open mind and spend a little time in reflection. Let's take my all-time favorite movie as an example, *The Wizard of Oz*.

The most obvious lesson to be pulled this classic is the value of teamwork and friendship. Dorothy, the scarecrow, the tin man and the lion were able to accomplish their goals together whereas on their own they would have failed—the scarecrow would still be on his pole, the tin man rusting in the woods, the lion hiding from his shadow and Dorothy asleep in the poppies, if she even made it that far. In addition, each one needed the encouragement and support of the others at different points. The scarecrow had to be put back together in the witch's forest, the lion had to be pulled in to see the wizard, the tin man needed to be oiled in the snow and Dorothy needed to be rescued from the castle. The key lesson is we need other people in our lives. On the job we need their expertise, their perspective, their ideas and their encouragement to do the best job we can do. In our lives we will all face some kind of crises at some point, and probably more than one. Without others to support us and assist us at those times, life gets extremely tough. Building solid relationships on the job and in your personal life is the ultimate key to success.

Everybody on the team took turns leading. Dorothy was the most obvious leader. She recruited the others and provided the overall vision of getting to the Emerald City to see the wizard. The lion took the lead when they were climbing up the mountain to the witch's castle to rescue Dorothy. It was the tin man and his axe that freed Dorothy from the room with the hourglass. It was the scarecrow's idea to cut the rope holding the chandelier giving them a few moments of freedom before the final confrontation. Even the smallest member of the team played a significant role.

Remember, it was Toto that led the others to the location where Dorothy was being held prisoner. Everyone on any team or group has something unique and valuable to contribute and should be allowed to lead the group at an appropriate time.

Teams can succeed in spite of different agendas on the part of the individual participants as long as communication is open and honest. Dorothy wanted to get home, the scarecrow longed for a brain, the tin man yearned for a heart and the lion craved courage. While each had a different goal, they all knew they could succeed by getting to the wizard and they openly communicated their objective with each other. Each aspiration was acknowledged by the others as important and valid, but the focus was kept on the overall objective. This is a common situation in business. Everyone wants the company to succeed, but marketing is focused on sales, IT is focused on security and system requirements, actuarial is focused on pricing standards and reserve adequacy, accounting on reporting issues, HR is focused on talent issues and development, etc. We all need to remember that while each area's needs are important, nobody wins unless we focus on the overarching objective—serving the client.

The Oz foursome was willing to sacrifice. No doubt disappointed with the wizard's initial response, they were willing to do what was necessary to accomplish their mission. Getting to Oz was work; attempting to secure the broom of the wicked witch of the west was overtime. The perceived end of their journey was really just the beginning of the next stage of their adventure. As an application, a project you sincerely believe in may be sent back by senior management for more analysis. Don't become frustrated; pursue the project to its definitive end. The key message is that very little in life is accomplished without commitment and perseverance.

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Individuals can seem pretty intimidating, even down right scary, until you get to know them. Take the wizard for example. Who can ever forget our friends as they cowered before the great Oz culminated by the lion jumping out the window just before commercial? Take time to draw people out from behind the curtain many hide behind and you'll be amazed at what you find—most likely a person with dreams and insecurities, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses not too dissimilar from yourself. When you get to know someone, you understand them better which then leads to a basis for trust. As a result, individual-, team- and business-unit performance will improve because we work better together when we know and understand and trust each other.

It pays to have a competitive advantage. Dorothy had the ruby slippers and the witch didn't. The ruby slippers got Dorothy into the Emerald City and they got her home. A competitive advantage can be a product feature that the competition doesn't have or it can be a personal skill or ability that other individuals don't have. Look for and cultivate the gifts you have been given that make you uniquely you.

Planning is important, but things happens that you can't foresee, so be flexible. Whether it's poisonous poppies, winged monkeys, enchanted trees throwing apples or free-falling markets, competitive pressures or volatile mortality and morbidity, the unpredictable and undesirable happens. Don't be swayed. Keep the ultimate goal in mind, get the help you need, deal with the problem head on and chart a new course to your destination. The road may be rocky, but the road is there somewhere.

Sometimes we can be overly critical of ourselves. The scarecrow didn't think he had any brains, yet it was his plan that got them dressed as guards and into the witch's castle and it was his idea to taunt the enchanted trees to get their apples. The tin man didn't think he had a heart, but he cared enough about Dorothy to protect her from the witch whether he got that heart or not. The lion claimed to have no courage (which wasn't too far off the mark), but climbing mountains and fighting castle guards is not for the timid. The key, as usual, is balance. Don't be arrogant and over-confident, but don't be too hard on yourself either. Give yourself credit and delight in what you do well.

Don't forget to enjoy the ride. Life is an adventure. Oz may have been more challenging and dangerous than Kansas, but it was beautiful, in color and certainly not boring. Some of our most difficult times become some of our fondest memories just a little farther down the yellow brick road.

So what have we learned from look at Oz? Teamwork, friendship, communication, commitment, sacrifice, leadership, the value of individual contributions, and flexibility to name a few. What could you add to the list? I'll add one more. Work and career can be very rewarding, but they can also be very time consuming. On some of those late nights at the office just stop and remember, "There's no place like home."

(Note: if you liked this article, check out the alternative learning session at the annual meeting focusing on *The Lord of the Rings*) □

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