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What a Famous Sioux Warrior Can Teach Today's Leaders



Photo by Josh Lien (joshlien27.com)

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by Chip Bell

We are in the season of leadership examination. Decisions made around cabinet posts, rulers of countries, board members, and the tops of pyramids will have implications for practically every person on the planet. The headlines shout of new rules, roles, and responsibilities for governance of all types and contexts. According to a 2023 [McKinsey](#) report, only 25% of global business

leaders see their counterparts as inspirational and fit for purpose. What practical lessons might today's leaders learn from this famous warrior-leader?

Crazy Horse was one of the Native American warriors who defeated Lieutenant Colonel George Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn in Montana in 1876. He was famous for his extreme bravery, quiet humility, and intense commitment. One Arapaho warrior, Water Man, who fought with Crazy Horse, characterized him as "the bravest man I ever saw." Crazy Horse would ride closest to Custer's soldiers, encouraging his warriors as he shouted, "Hoya –hay. This is a good day to die!" "All the soldiers were shooting at him," said Water Man, "but he was never hit." He was a warrior-leader unleashed!

The goal of all effective leaders is the pursuit of excellence. But it is more than the quest for the kind of achievement that resides at the far end of the yardstick. It is a strong expression of wholeness. Their infectious heartiness touches, influences, and gives courage to all around them. Crazy Horse did more than simply show off personal bravery; he unearthed like-minded daring in his fellow warriors. What practical lessons might today's leaders learn from this Sioux warrior?

Avoid Guilt and Encourage Confidence



A little-known story about Crazy Horse came from Chief Rain-in-the-Face from the Hunkpapa tribe of the great Sioux nation. In the book *The Custer Myth* by historian W. A. Graham, he reports that some Indian braves went into battle only after consuming drugs, alcohol, or both. Rain-in-the-Face claimed Crazy Horse never needed such help to be brave. He wanted to remain totally in the moment, high only on his pledge to prevail.

Warrior-leadership unleashed is a genuine expression honed from a strong sense of self. It comes from leaders who *are* their role, not merely *act* their role. It is unabashedly being who we genuinely are in front of others. When unshackled by a fear of rejection, warrior-leaders are released to go further, soar higher, and keep going longer. Realness is boldness unclothed and without remorse. Author Simon Sinek wrote, "Great leaders don't see themselves as great; they see themselves as human. They don't try to be perfect; they try to be themselves."

Memo to Leaders: Examine leadership practices that directly or subtly erode the self-esteem of your associates. Avoid using guilt as a tool for influence. Communicate a

compelling purpose. Confidently show your feelings, not just your thoughts, to help create a climate of confidence and bravery. Encourage and affirm initiative. Remember the words of writer Tex Bender: "You can pretend to care, but you cannot pretend to be there." Be fully present in associates' lives, not just a witness to their toil.

Model Honesty and Not Pretense

Crazy Horse was shy as a young man. Author John Neihardt described Crazy Horse in his book *Black Elk Speaks* as a person of great modesty and reserve but who was generous to the poor, the elderly, and children. "Everybody liked him," wrote Neihardt, "and would do anything he wanted or go anywhere he said."



Warrior-leadership unleashed carries the trait of trustworthiness because it is borne of openness and vulnerability. We trust people who are transparent and forthright. It is the trait of people willing to pioneer and experiment. They carry a personal vision of excellence, even when there is no plan for success. They boldly take the initiative, not out of duty or response to the command, but from a strong sense of purpose. "In today's fast-paced business world," wrote author Marie-Claire Ross in her book *Trusted to Thrive*, "the more trust you have across your organization, the faster you can operate."

Memo to Leaders: Encourage associates to set high goals and objectives. As Norman Vincent Peale wrote, "Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll wind up among the stars." Be an observable champion of associates' demonstrations of their personal bests. Confidently reveal your mistakes; you will invite others to be open and trustworthy. Never tolerate mediocrity in yourself, in others, in anything, ever. Share stories of greatness and invite examples of excellence from others. Speak in possibilities, not in restrictions.

Foster an Environment That Is Inclusive, Not Exclusive



There is a back story to Crazy Horse's battlefield gallantry. After a violent, controversial incident in his village, he ventured alone to seek spiritual guidance on how to cope with the incident. He had a dream in which a warrior came out of a lake and floated above him. The warrior told Crazy Horse that if he dressed modestly and never took

scalps or war trophies, he would never be harmed in battle. Crazy Horse's father, Waglula, interpreted the dream as a plea for compassion.

The story provides a metaphor to characterize a feature of warrior-leadership unleashed. As practitioners of empathy and compassion, associates are unbridled to become magnets for bringing out the best in others around them. They are people with an optimistic spirit of greatness that others want to emulate. "When we're looking for compassion," said Brene Brown in her viral TED talk, "We need someone who is deeply rooted, is able to bend and, most of all, embraces us for our strengths and struggles."

Memo to Leaders: Be famous for your kindness and empathy. Never allow associates to use hurtful sarcasm or show disrespect to others, regardless of their intent. Pursue optimism. Let your unit become a haven for contrary views and a hangout for people with progressive attitudes. Be quick to celebrate moments of achievement and display sincere concern when associates are in pain. Listen to learn, not to correct or make a point. Seek to find your echo in your associates. Be a forceful spirit for the remarkable.

Warrior-leadership unleashed is a demonstration of confidence with every ounce of timidity or reserve removed. It comes from the influence of leaders who reframe their partnership with their performers to be their guide, not their shepherd; supporter, not commander, and an ardent champion of removing any hint of fear in the workplace. It is fundamentally a celebration of bravery. And it is as rare today as it is vital to organizational growth and success.

Writing for the website Truthdig.com, author Chris Hedges said about Crazy Horse: "There are few resistance figures in American history as noble as Crazy Horse. His ferocity of spirit remains a guiding light for all who seek lives of defiance." Whether the defiance is against the "domestication" of Native Americans or the "dehumidification" of mediocrity, warrior-leadership unleashed is the personification of the Crazy Horse spirit.

About Chip Bell



Chip R. Bell is a renowned keynote speaker and the author of several award-winning, best-selling books. Global Gurus in 2024 ranked him for the tenth year in a row in the top ten keynote speakers in the world on customer experience. He is also an alliance partner with On3.ai that specializes in mobile based, AI-driven field learning programs with high level transfer of learning and retention and an instructor with MyFuel.io. He can be reached at www.chipbell.com.