

Fish the Conditions

Leadership When the Plan Changes

There is something about being on the water that has a way of teaching lessons you weren't necessarily looking for.

You can prepare all week for a fishing trip. You can study maps, check the weather, organize your tackle, charge every battery, spool fresh line, and have a plan for exactly where you're going to start when the sun comes up.

Then you get on the water. And the lake has a different plan.

The wind is blowing from the wrong direction. The water is higher or lower than expected. The temperature changed overnight. The spot that produced fish yesterday suddenly seems empty.

That's fishing.

And, if we're paying attention, that's leadership too.

Preparation Matters, but the Plan Isn't Sacred

Good anglers prepare. Good leaders do too.

Preparation gives us confidence and direction. It helps us anticipate problems and use our time wisely.

Whether we're leading an organization, running a business, coaching a team, volunteering in our community, or simply trying to lead our family well, preparation matters.

But there's an important distinction:

Being committed to the mission doesn't mean being married to the plan.

Sometimes leaders become so invested in how they planned to accomplish something that they lose sight of what they were trying to accomplish in the first place.

Think about fishing.

If you've thrown the same lure at the same piece of cover for an hour without a bite, eventually you have a decision to make.

You can blame the fish.

You can complain about the weather.

You can keep making the exact same cast.

Or you can change something.

Leadership requires that same willingness to adjust.

Read What's Happening Around You

Experienced anglers don't just fish. They observe.

They notice wind direction, water clarity, temperature, baitfish, current, vegetation, cloud cover and countless other small clues.

Good leaders learn to read conditions too.

What's the mood of your team?

Who has become unusually quiet?

Is communication breaking down?

Are people losing enthusiasm?

Is a program that worked five years ago still accomplishing what it was designed to accomplish?

Are we listening to the people around us, or simply waiting for our turn to speak?

Sometimes the warning signs are there long before the problem becomes obvious. Leadership isn't only about giving direction.

It's also about paying attention.

Adaptability Isn't Weakness

There's an old idea that strong leadership means making a decision and sticking with it no matter what.

There certainly are times when leaders must stand firm.

Values shouldn't change every time the wind blows.

Integrity isn't negotiable.

The mission matters.

But methods can change.

Changing your approach after receiving new information isn't weakness. In many situations, it's wisdom.

There's a big difference between changing your principles and changing your tactics.

A fisherman may change lures without changing the goal of catching fish.

A leader can change the plan without abandoning the mission.

That's adaptability.

Persistence Versus Stubbornness

This may be one of the hardest lessons.

We often praise persistence—and rightly so.

Don't quit.

Keep moving forward.

Stay after it.

Those are important lessons.

But persistence and stubbornness aren't the same thing.

Persistence says:

"I'm committed to reaching the destination."

Stubbornness says:

"I'm committed to reaching it exactly the way I originally planned."

That's a major difference.

Sometimes leadership means pushing through adversity.

Other times leadership means recognizing that the approach isn't working.

Wisdom is knowing the difference.

You Can't Control the Conditions

Fishing teaches humility because there are simply too many things outside our control.

Leadership is the same.

You cannot control every personality.

You cannot control every decision someone else makes.

You cannot control every criticism.

You cannot control whether everyone agrees with you.

You cannot control every unexpected event that lands on your doorstep Monday morning.

But you can control your response.

You can control whether you listen before reacting.

You can control whether frustration becomes anger.

You can control whether you treat people respectfully.

You can control whether you learn from failure.

And you can decide what you're going to do next.

Sometimes we spend so much energy fighting circumstances we cannot change that we have very little energy left for the things we actually can.

Sometimes Success Isn't the Fish

Anyone who fishes long enough eventually experiences one of those days.

You put in the work.

You make hundreds of casts.

You move locations.

You change presentations.

And still—nothing.

Was the day wasted?

Maybe not.

Perhaps you eliminated water that won't need to be fished tomorrow.

Maybe you discovered something about the lake.

Maybe you became better with a technique.

Maybe you spent time with someone who needed that conversation.

Maybe you simply had a few quiet hours to think.

Leadership works this way too.

Not every investment produces immediate results.

Sometimes you mentor someone and don't see the impact until years later.

Sometimes you introduce an idea that isn't accepted until someone else eventually carries it forward.

Sometimes the person you encouraged never tells you what that conversation meant.

Leadership cannot always be measured with a scoreboard.

Some of the most important results take time.

Know When to Move

There comes a point when an angler has to pull up the trolling motor and go somewhere else.

That doesn't mean the original spot was foolish.

It means the conditions are telling you it's time to move.

Maybe there's something in your own life right now that isn't working.

A conversation you've been avoiding.

A leadership approach that isn't connecting.

A relationship that needs more listening.

A program that needs updating.

A personal habit that needs changing.

Before you simply try harder, ask a different question:

Do I need more effort—or do I need a different approach?

That's a powerful leadership question.

Because sometimes progress doesn't require working harder.

Sometimes progress requires having enough humility to change.

From the Coffee Cup

Leadership isn't about controlling every condition around us.

It's about learning how to lead when the conditions aren't what we expected.

Prepare well.

Pay attention.

Listen.

Stay committed to your principles.

Be willing to change your methods.

And don't confuse stubbornness with persistence.

Whether you're leading an organization, a business, a team, a family—or simply yourself—the conditions are going to change.

The question isn't whether they will.

The question is:

What will you do when they do?

Sometimes the best thing you can do is change the bait, change the location, learn something from the experience, and make another cast.

One person. One conversation. One cup.

COFFEE CUP WORKBOOK

Episode 14

FISH THE CONDITIONS

Leadership When the Plan Changes

Being committed to the mission doesn't mean being married to the plan.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Purpose

This workbook is designed to help you examine how you respond when circumstances change, plans fail, or people don't react the way you expected. It can be completed individually or used to guide a small-group leadership discussion.

Read the Water

Think about one situation in your life, workplace, organization, team, or family that isn't going according to plan.

What did I originally expect to happen?

What is actually happening?

What conditions have changed since I made my original plan?

Control the Controllables

Separate the situation into two categories.

Things I cannot control:

Things I can influence or control:

Now ask yourself:

Where am I currently spending most of my energy?

What would happen if I redirected more of that energy toward the things I can influence?

Change the Bait

Think about a problem where you have repeatedly tried the same approach.

What have I been doing?

What result am I getting?

What is one different approach I could try?

Persistence or Stubbornness?

Consider something you've been determined to accomplish.

Ask yourself:

Am I committed to the mission—or committed to my method?

What part of the goal should remain non-negotiable?

What part of my approach could change?

Read the People

Leadership conditions aren't only about circumstances. They're about people.

Think about the people around you.

Who might I need to listen to more closely?

Who has become quiet or disengaged?

What conversation have I been avoiding?

When was the last time I asked someone, "What do you think we should do?" and genuinely listened to the answer?

Lessons From an Empty Livewell

Think about a recent disappointment, failure, or situation where the outcome wasn't what you wanted.

What happened?

What did I learn?

What would I do differently next time?

Was there a positive result I initially overlooked?

Your Leadership Cast

Complete these four statements:

I need to STOP:

I need to START:

I need to CONTINUE:

I need to CHANGE:

Coffee Cup Challenge

This week, identify one situation that isn't going according to plan.

Don't immediately work harder at fixing it.

Instead, stop long enough to read the conditions.

Ask yourself:

What has changed?

What can I control?

What am I missing?

Who should I listen to?

Do I need more persistence—or a different approach?

Then make one intentional adjustment.

At the end of the week, write down what happened:

Around-the-Cup Discussion

For groups, teams, boards, or leadership development sessions, discuss this question:

“Where are we still fishing yesterday’s conditions?”

What are we doing today simply because it’s how we’ve always done it?

What has changed around us?

What should never change because it represents our values or mission?

What methods should we be willing to reconsider?

Final Reflection

A good leader doesn't control the weather.

A good leader learns to read it.

A good leader doesn't abandon the mission every time conditions change.

But neither does a good leader keep making the same cast simply because that's the cast they planned to make.

Stay anchored to your values. Stay committed to your mission. But remain flexible enough to change how you get there.

My commitment this week:

Fish the conditions. Learn from every cast. Keep moving forward.

One person. One conversation. One cup.