

## **SOMETHING TO HONK ABOUT (MAY 2, 2006)**

### **I've always believed I could learn from anyone. But a bird? Teaching me? About leadership communication?**

In recent weeks, the skies around me have been filled with migrating Canada Geese. I've never been interested in these critters, unless I had to chase one off the bow of my little sailboat or scrape their droppings off my shoes after an evening walk.

But coasting along the highway, I had a chance to watch them in action as hundreds headed northward.

**Geese travel in a distinctive V shape.** One goose's flapping wings create an uplift for the one that follows. Apparently, that arrangement allows the flock to travel 71 per cent further than one bird could travel on its own. For the geese, this is instinct at work, yet it's as if each trusts the other geese as well as the V formation to get them to their destination. As leaders, we start a process where the group understands and agrees on the goal and the route to get there. When we emphasize the interrelatedness of individual contributions, people see where their work fits into the whole and where other people's work supports them.

**Geese take turns leading.** This is amazing to watch. When the lead goose has had enough, it drops back and someone else takes over. Sharing leadership helps the group go further. Using individual strengths strengthens the whole team. Leading can be hard; give yourself a chance to recover.

**Geese honk to encourage each other.** This may be unconscious for geese, sound modified by the speed of their flapping wings. But we can do it consciously. Honk! Think how marvelous it would be if all the honking we heard was encouraging. As leaders, when we practice supportive honking, we inspire others to do the same.

**Geese merge their Vs without a fuss.** It's fascinating to watch a five-geese V join a larger group. From the ground, we can't tell if they discuss leaping on board, but they just seem to forget that they're the "new guys" and fall in. Could we use that as a model for avoiding the "them" and "us" feelings that accompany mergers, reorganizations, or even interdepartmental transfers?

**Stray geese rejoin the flock quickly.** If you watch one goose stray out of the formation, you'll see it gradually work its way back to the flock. The extra effort required to go it alone isn't worth it. Is there a lesson in this? "Conform or die?" I think not. As leaders, we can create environments where original thinkers and creative people are encouraged to move from the margins of our organizations and are included in our discussions. These are places where people express their *authentic* ideas, not just the ones they think we *want* to hear.

**Geese stick by each other.** If a goose is ill, injured, or shot, two others will leave the V formation and stay with it until it dies or is able to fly again. Then they catch up with another group. That's why you'll sometimes see two or three geese, in a cluster, flapping like mad. When we provide genuine support to people when things are rough, we build connection and mutual commitment that lasts into the good times.

**So now I'm wondering where we ever got the idea that geese are silly?** Sounds pretty smart, to me. I also wonder if I'll remember all this wonderful stuff the next time I'm scraping goose poop off my shoes. Honk! Honk! Honk!

Posted by Susan Johnston on May 02, 2006 at 05:32 PM in [Face-to-Face Communication](#), [Leadership Communication](#), [Organizational Communication](#), [Personal Effectiveness](#)