

*A Message to
Garcia*



WILL YOU DELIVER IT?



ACTON FOUNDATION
for Entrepreneurial Excellence

A Message to Garcia

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“THERE’S A FELLOW BY THE NAME OF ROWAN...”

It was 1899. President William McKinley needed to deliver an urgent message to General Calixto Garcia, the leader of the insurgents in America’s war against Spain. But Garcia was lost somewhere deep inside the mountain vastness of Cuba.

“There’s a fellow by the name of Rowan who will find Garcia if anyone can,” someone told the president. So McKinley summoned Colonel Andrew Rowan.

Do you long to hear your name called when time is short and the stakes are high?

Rowan took McKinley’s letter, “sealed it in an oil-skin pouch, strapped it over his heart, in four days landed by night off the coast of Cuba from an open boat, disappeared into the jungle and in three weeks came out on the other side of the island, having traversed a hostile country on foot, and delivered his letter to Garcia.”

Notice that Rowan didn’t equivocate. He didn’t ask McKinley for detailed instructions. He didn’t hire a consultant or assemble a task force. He simply took the letter and delivered it to Garcia.

Do you long to hear your name called when time is short and the stakes are high? Do you want to lead people who can be trusted with important tasks on an important mission that just might change the world?

If so, heed the words below, learn to “get the job done” like Rowan, and extraordinary opportunities almost surely will come your way. Use these assignments to hone your natural talents, mastering a discipline in a way that brings you great joy and serves the needs of others, and you’ll be well on your way to discovering a “calling” in life and embarking on a Hero’s Journey.

If so, heed the words below ...

THE RAREST SKILL OF ALL: THE ABILITY TO EXECUTE

People like Rowan—who accomplish missions quickly and efficiently, with minimum oversight—are as rare today as they were 100 years ago when publisher Elbert Hubbard wrote “A Message to Garcia.”

If you doubt this, read Hubbard's words below to someone who is charged with leading an organization:

“My heart goes out to the man who does his work when the ‘boss’ is away, as well as when he is at home. And the man who, when given a letter for Garcia, quietly takes the missive, without asking any idiotic questions, and with no intention of chucking it into the nearest sewer, or of doing aught else but deliver it, never gets ‘laid off,’ nor has to go on strike for higher wages. Civilization is one long anxious search for just such individuals. Anything such a man asks shall be granted; his kind is so rare that no employer can afford to let him go. He is wanted in every city, town and village—in every office, shop, store and factory. The world cries out for such: he is needed and needed badly, the man who can carry a message to Garcia.”

The ability to execute is more valuable than education or talent, because it is far rarer.

The leader will be nodding in agreement before you finish the first sentence. By the end of the paragraph, he or she will likely say, “So true. So true. If only I had a few more people like that. Each is worth his or her weight in gold.”

The ability to execute is more valuable than education or talent, because it is far rarer. As Hubbard notes in the next section, this means most people are trapped in dysfunctional organizations, imprisoned by the curse of low expectations.

A WORLD OF UNDERACHIEVERS

THE CURSE OF THE AVERAGE ORGANIZATION

If you have ever managed or been trapped in a dysfunctional organization, you understand Hubbard's lament of the “imbecility of the average man—the inability or unwillingness to concentrate on a thing and do it.”

If you have ever managed or been trapped in a dysfunctional organization, you understand Hubbard's lament ...

“You, reader, put this matter to a test: You are sitting in your office—six clerks within call.

Summon any one and make this request: ‘Please look in the encyclopedia and make a brief memorandum for me concerning the life of Correggio.’

Will the clerk quietly say, ‘Yes sir’ and go do the task?

On your life, he will not. He will look at you out of a fishy eye and ask one or more of the following questions:

Who was he?

Which encyclopedia?

Where is the encyclopedia?

Was I hired for that?

Don't you mean Bismarck?

What's the matter with Charlie doing it?

Is he dead?

Is there any hurry?

Shan't I bring you the book and let you look it up yourself?

What do you want to know for?

And I will lay you ten to one that after you have answered the questions, and explained how to find the information, and why you want it, the clerk will go off and get one of the other clerks to help him try to find Garcia and then come back and tell you that there is no such man."

"I'LL DO IT MYSELF"

Anyone who has tried to delegate to the average person knows the truth of what Hubbard describes next:

Now if you are wise, you will not bother to explain to your 'assistant' that Correggio is indexed under the C's, not in the K's, but you will smile sweetly and say, 'Never mind,' and go look it up yourself.

Tempting as this may be, it is impossible to build an effective organization without delegating important tasks to talented and capable people. It's the only way to make a grand vision a reality.

That means the only way to build such an organization is to attract, challenge and retain as many people like Colonel Rowan as possible.

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HAVING THE COURAGE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Woody Allen said that 90% of life is "just showing up." If so, the most important 10% of life is execution. Far too few people do either consistently. But if the ability to execute is so valuable, why is it so rare? Why aren't more people self-starters who can stay on task until the job is finished?

... if the ability to execute is so valuable, why is it so rare?

Some would say that this generation of youth is unwilling to work. Others that our public schools have failed to instill the right character or habits. Still others that television or video games or other elements of popular culture are to blame.

Perhaps, but Hubbard wrote his essay long before public schools, television or video games. This suggests that the problem is more deeply rooted in human nature. People want to make a difference. Be as cynical as you like, but deep inside every seemingly lazy and distracted person is an individual with rare gifts who longs to be called to an important mission. It's just that somewhere in life, through overbearing or overindulgent parents or disinterested teachers, tyrannical coaches or uncaring bosses, the passion for a job well done has been extinguished.

People in their late teens and early twenties often have a misconception about life. They believe that their greatest challenges will come from unforeseen events and external circumstances. This turns out to be untrue. The greatest challenges always come from within.

Unforeseen setbacks do occur, often at the worst times. You'll come across a few saints and wise men and women who have mastered external and internal challenges. But far more often you'll come across people who are lost, not living up to their potential or just plain evil. That's the real world.

You have a choice ...
you can choose to
start developing the
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the balance.

Nevertheless, later in life, as you look back, you will realize that your most forbidding obstacles were quiet voices, voices whispering destructive thoughts that held you back: "Nothing matters. It's all for naught." Or "You aren't good enough." Or "You're a loser."¹

Make no mistake about it. You have a choice. You can blame your parents, teachers, coaches or bosses. Or you can choose to start developing the attitudes, habits and instincts so your name will be called when success hangs in the balance.

DEVELOPING THE RIGHT ATTITUDES, HABITS AND INSTINCTS

The secret to developing the right attitudes, habits and instincts for crisp execution is cultivating a bias toward action. Practice the following steps until they become deeply imbedded habits:

1. Accept the mission and get started.

If offered an assignment where the objective is clear, accept it without asking for further instructions. Then take the first step.

2. Be curious.

Most times you won't have all the answers. Don't see this as a sign of weakness. Instead, unleash your natural curiosity. Focus on asking the right questions first. Then seek answers.

3. Immediately sketch out a plan.

Quickly draft a provisional plan with goals, milestones and deadlines. If you don't

¹ Many thanks to Ted Beasley, Teaching Pastor of Gateway Church, in Austin, Texas, for this idea.

know enough to craft such a plan, decide how to gather the information you need. But in all cases, begin to move forward immediately.

If the objective seems overwhelming or you are unsure of where to start, break it down using the Vision, Strategies, Projects, Tactics (VSPT) framework:

Vision: This is your objective – delivering the letter to Garcia.

Strategies: What are the ways you could achieve this objective? Sometimes there will be many strategies to choose from, other times only one. For Rowan, there was only one strategy: hand-deliver it. Today, other options might be to deliver the message by phone or by e-mail.

Projects: What big things need to get done to accomplish the objective? Create a series of major milestones. For example: Sail to Cuba, trek through the forest, find Garcia, plot a course back home.

Tactics: What do I need to do today to make progress on a project? Make a checklist: Hire a boat crew, find a guide for the trek, arrange for provisions, buy mosquito netting. Quickly start on these tasks, and before you know it, you will be executing.

4. If you need resources, don't be afraid to ask.

A critical job for any leader is to allocate resources—money, people, his own time even—among competing projects. If you ask clearly for what you need and explain concisely why it is necessary to achieve the objective, a leader will give you the additional resources you need.

5. Enlist help when needed.

Don't hesitate to ask for help from peers, but remember that the responsibility for accomplishing the task is yours alone. (And remember that the best way to get others to help you is to have helped them first.)

6. Report back and show your work.

Frequently report your progress with objective measures. Whenever possible, provide samples of your work. Instead of asking how to accomplish a task, show what you have done so far. If you are off course, you'll get immediate feedback to put you back on the right path.

7. Underpromise and overdeliver.

Make it a point to set reasonable goals and always exceed them. If you want leaders to trust you with critical tasks, develop a reputation for getting the job done better, sooner and at a lower cost than you promised.

8. Expect to make (small) mistakes.

Accept mistakes as the price you pay to learn. Include an honest assessment of missteps in your progress reports. Embrace them as minor setbacks and correct them quickly. Jot down the lessons for reflection later, after the task has been accomplished.

9. Put results before schmoozing.

You want to spend time with those higher up in the organization so they'll get to know you and appreciate your work. First focus on contributing something of value, and you'll be surprised by how much attention you receive.

Courage isn't the absence of fear but rather the ability to act in the face of it.

10. Replace the voices in your head with positive action.

Turn away from the temptation to dwell on negative thoughts. Dwelling on fears only gives them more power. The best way to rid yourself of a fear is to take positive action. Courage isn't the absence of fear but rather the ability to act in the face of it.

SEEKING A HERO'S JOURNEY: PERSPECTIVE AND INSPIRATION FOR THE LONG HAUL

Developing action-oriented habits will make you indispensable to any organization. But how do you find the inspiration you need for particularly difficult tasks? How do you choose which assignments to pursue and prioritize between urgent and important tasks?

... how do you find the inspiration you need for particularly difficult tasks?

Practice the steps below to hone your talents and develop a sense of "calling," and you will find the inspiration, discernment and perspective you need to take on increasingly important missions.

1. Begin to see your life as a "calling" toward a Hero's Journey.

Your life is too valuable to waste. Embrace the idea of a "calling"—a reason that you were put on this earth. Envision your life as a quest, a series of daily struggles and larger challenges worth overcoming for a worthy mission.²

2. Develop your gifts and talents into a discipline. Become world-class at something.

Everyone has special God-given gifts. Discover yours and accept challenges that allow you to practice and perfect these skills. Develop a reputation for mastering a discipline and extraordinary opportunities will seek you out.

3. Find a "deep burning need" you care about.

Your lifelong mission will be more fulfilling if it serves the needs of others. Look for opportunities or injustices that speak to your heart. Find where your gifts, tasks you enjoy and a "deep burning need" intersect and you will have found your calling.

4. Surround yourself with good people and worthy role models.

Find role models who inspire you. Look to people who are further along in life's journey for the right questions to ask. Surround yourself with good people who care about you.

² A good introduction to understanding a Hero's Journey is another Acton Note in this series, *Stars & Steppingstones. Some Choices Only Come Around Once*, available at actonfoundation.org. A step-by-step guide to discerning your calling can be found at Acton-Life-of-Meaning.org.

MOVING FROM INDIVIDUAL ACTION TO BUILDING A WORLD-CLASS ORGANIZATION

Once you develop a reputation as someone who can be trusted with important tasks, you will begin to attract others like you. Combine this with a sense of mission, and you can begin to build a highly effective organization.

Take the following steps if you want to attract the right people and harness all your energy toward a world-changing mission.

1. Make the mission clear and meaningful.

You want people to sign on for the right reasons. Make it clear how your company intends to change the world for the better.

2. Set unreasonably high standards.

You want to attract the right people. Even more importantly, you want the wrong people to self-select out. Set high standards and clear ethical guardrails and stick to them. People like Rowan attract more people like Rowan.

3. Align incentives with the few key tasks—the Key Success Factors—for the mission.

Set clear, measurable objectives for success. Pay people to accomplish them. You'll be surprised at how quickly the quality of applicants will improve.

4. Make all employment conditional.

Hire everyone for a probationary period. Assign difficult tasks and see who performs. Be ruthless in your initial evaluations to save later heartaches. Underachievers may change over time, but only if they make the decision to change themselves. Your assignment is to get the job done, not run a counseling service for underachievers.

5. Hire leaders who know how to get the job done too.

Leading is different from executing. It requires the ability to delegate and inspire. But insist that all leaders first know how to execute, and have little patience for those who don't.

6. Put the monkey on their back.

Never allow a subordinate to bring you problems, even though this may play to your desire for action. Leaders execute in their assignments because the people led by them are inspired to execute on theirs. If you have attracted a team that is dependent on you for detailed directions, then you are the problem.

7. Take time to coach those who have proved they can execute.

Developing talent is a leader's number one priority. Once someone has proved that he or she can execute, take a personal interest so you can inspire him or her to even greater accomplishments.

THE WORLD NEEDS YOU

The world is overpopulated with planners, procrastinators and political schemers—parasites who prey on a market economy. People who will accept a task and execute it promptly are as rare today as they were when Elbert Hubbard wrote of Colonel Rowan’s mission.

The world is overpopulated with planners, procrastinators and political schemers—parasites who prey on a market economy.

The secret to such success lies not within the IQ that you were born with but with having the character and courage to accept a worthy mission and get the job done. If you want to live a life full of interesting challenges, focus on the action-oriented steps above until they become habits. Master a discipline that brings you great joy and you will never want for opportunity.

Even better, once you have learned to get the job done, pick a worthy mission and surround yourself with like people and then you will change the world.

Perhaps then someday, when a truly important mission hangs in the balance, you’ll hear your name called as someone “who will find Garcia if anyone can.”

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