

Balancing Facts and Faith by John C. Maxwell

The conditions at the Andersonville (Ga.) Prison during the Civil War were nothing short of horrible. Union soldiers interned there were constantly exposed to the elements. The food was inadequate. The water was impure. The entire camp was crowded and filthy.

More than 49,000 prisoners were held in this stockade, including as many as 30,000 at any given time. Nearly 14,000 of those prisoners died, many from epidemics caused by the conditions. The prison superintendent was eventually tried by a U.S. military court, convicted of murder and hanged.

It's appropriate that this historic prison site is home to the National Prisoner of War Museum. My wife and I spent several hours there, and I was particularly moved by the testimonials from prisoners of various wars throughout history. Among those is the account of Admiral James Stockdale, who survived seven years in a Vietcong prisoner of war camp and eventually was awarded the Medal of Honor.

How did Stockdale survive for seven years in one of the worst prisons imaginable? He focused on two seemingly contradictory things: his life could not be worse than it was at that very moment and his life someday would be better than ever.

Good to Great author Jim Collins uses this "Stockdale Paradox" to describe a trait he found in what he calls "Level 5 Leaders"—those leaders who are the very best at what they do. I call it "fact and faith" leadership, and I agree that it's essential for moving from good leadership to truly great leadership. It's the challenge of simultaneously holding the tension of facts in one hand and faith in the other hand.

Writer and businessman Max DePree says the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality, and that means leaders determine the facts. Napoleon pointed out that leaders are dealers in hope. And as strange as it might sometimes seem, the two ideas aren't mutually exclusive. In fact, it's essential that you master them both if you want to move from good leadership to great leadership.

Focusing only on the facts can be pretty depressing, especially for an organization that is just starting out or is in need of a makeover. Even an organization that's doing well can get stymied by focusing exclusively on the facts.

But it's also all too common for leaders to build an organization only on vision and faith in that vision. Such organizations lack a foundation of reality. You don't build an organization on dreams; you build it on reality. After you have reality, the dreams stand a chance.

Facts are the foundation upon which we build things. Faith is the wings with which we fly.

Facts are used for evaluating people. Faith is used for encouraging people.

Facts are what managers see. Faith is what motivators see.

So it's not one or the other. It's not whichever one fits the moment. It's holding them in both hands and understanding, "I have to be realistic, and yet at the same time I have to have faith." Going from good leadership to great leadership means balancing facts with faith and never forsaking one for the other.