



Hidden support... the value of back-up

On the 21st July 1969, two men walked on the moon. Millions watched as Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin Jr. set foot on another world, a momentous milestone in the annals of human exploration, science, determination and courage. For a moment, consider the enormity of the occasion against the backdrop of all the unknown factors and risks faced by the crew. Apollo 11 may have landed in the Sea of Tranquillity, but be assured the levels of tension aboard would hardly have been tranquil at all.

Never before – or perhaps possibly since – has such an occasion been so eloquently and accurately described (“One small step for man, but one giant leap for mankind”), as Armstrong did himself. Considering the scale of the expedition, perhaps his later summary of the mission put it in perspective: “I was elated, ecstatic and extremely surprised we were successful,” he admitted. Both astronauts would return home to become major heroes and celebrities, living examples of the courage that society and the world so desperately craved at the time.

But what has space travel and a moonwalk got to do with wilderness? And where is the connection with inner leadership? Please read on.

EXPLORING THE WILDERNESS

As a wilderness guide I make a living trekking through remote African wild-lands, running leadership trails and safaris. These trails explore both the outer wilderness of the environment around us, as well as the mystical wilderness within our own selves,



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of our thoughts, emotions and feelings. However, I must stress at this point, that I do not for one second suggest that exploring the bush is as challenging as exploring the wilderness that Armstrong and Aldrin faced in 1969 – far from it! Their expedition makes mine seem like a walk in the park.

But one of the most vital ingredients of a successful and safe trail comes in the form of a calm and reliable back-up guide. Especially during close up encounters with big-game, when things can get a little tense. When required, a good back-up guide offers a cool head and quiet support in handling the situation. And after spending two weeks walking and tracking big game in the bush, having recently, somewhat reluctantly, returned to my desk, I'd like to share the following story to explain what I mean.

VERY VALUABLE

A friend of mine works as a tracker and guide in the Okavango Delta in Botswana. His name is Baseki Mahowe, and he taught himself to speak English by reading bird and mammal reference books. And

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his gentle humility has touched many hearts out in the bush. While on trail, Baseki walks at the end of the group, bringing up the rear, scanning ahead and searching for any tracks of sign.

Although understated it is a very valuable position, and his strong, capable and confident presence brings a huge peace of mind out there. Bunker Roy, founder of the Barefoot College in India once said that a professional, regardless of his or her vocation, is defined by someone with confidence, competence and belief... If this is the case, then Baseki is indeed well qualified. He does not need a piece of paper hanging on his wall certifying him as a professional.

On one such trail a short time ago, we were tracking a lion pride in the Okavango. Their tracks led us through a verdant green floodplain, toward a thickly wooded grove beyond. By studying the footprints I could tell that their strides were slowing, indicating that they were tiring, possibly searching for a cool shady place to rest.

The spoor was very fresh, and all signs and clues, including the heightened alertness of impala and zebra nearby, suggested that the lions were close-by. A spark of electricity hung in the air.

Soon after we found them. Or they found us more accurately. As we walked around an Acacia tree thicket, the pride sprang up from the grass in front of us, followed by menacing growls and snarls from the lionesses present. It was a tense moment. When

this happens, it's very important to remain as still as possible, and upon turning to remind the trail group of this, I again witnessed Baseki's special quality. He was as calm and serene as a yogi, talking quietly to the trail clients explaining what the lions were doing. Soon the lions relaxed and we enjoyed a memorable encounter. I marvelled at this humble man's strength of character, and ability to assist others in crossing their fear boundaries. There is a palpable feeling of stillness and security around him.

THE UNSUNG HERO

But what of the moonwalk? Did you know that there was a third member of the Apollo 11 expedition who never had the chance to walk on the moon? Michael Collins, the unsung hero, remained on board the lunar craft, co-ordinating the walks of the other astronauts and forfeited his opportunity. After going all that way, he never got out! Imagine that for a moment. For me, a prime example of the value of unassuming hidden support ... which we all need around us. No frills, no fuss, just dependable back-up.



Perhaps then, ask yourselves a question ... when was the last time you were a Michael Collins or a Baseki Mahowe for your colleagues, friends or associates? When was the last time you offered hidden support and silent strength for someone in need, without an expectation of return? ■

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