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Execution Excellence

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15 Leadership Lessons

Gleaned from my El Camino crucible.



by Shannon Wallis

I WAS DRAWN TO MICRO-soft in 2004 after hearing its mission—*enable people and businesses to realize their full potential*—and after having a transformational experience—a month-long, 500-mile hike across northern Spain.

Why did I do that? I had a vision that was so compelling, I couldn't say no. And, it was one of the great learning experiences in my life, because it taught me what it takes to achieve our dreams and to get to our destinations.

Before this vision, I'd worked for 10 years in HR consulting. I learned how to help organizations get to their destinations in *three phases*: 1) analyze the current state—what's happening, what's not working well, what best practices exist; 2) envision the *desired future state*—consider best practices, adopt or adapt them, or create something new; and 3) implement the vision.

After years of consulting, I accepted a leadership development role with The Coca-Cola Company. After two years there, I received the *call* to go to Spain to walk *El Camino de Santiago*, the 800-kilometer footpath that starts in the Pyrenees along the border of France and ends in Northwest Spain at Santiago de Compostela—the place believed to be the burial site of Saint James.

15 Life Lessons

When my Marine husband Joe said, "You should do the *Camino*—I want you to go," I learned my first two lessons:

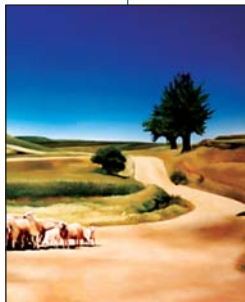
Lesson 1: Know where you are going. You need to know what you really want. You can wander aimlessly in life bumping into things that sometimes work for you. But when you *know* what you want in life, your actions are more prescriptive. Imagine the difference in planning a vacation when you say, "I want to see the volcanoes of Costa Rica" versus, "I'd like to go somewhere warm." Clarity makes taking action easier.

Lesson 2: Know what you are leaving behind. You need to know *why* you

are making the change and what you are leaving behind. Knowing why you want to make a change provides momentum. For me, the *Camino* became a symbol for a new beginning. I needed to let go of some things to move forward in life.

When I decided to go, I invited my friend Susan to go with me. She'd started a new job three months earlier, and I doubted that she'd come. But she e-mailed me the next day: "Funny you'd ask. I just lost my job. I'm coming."

Lesson 3: Invite others to participate—they might surprise you. Tell people about your plans to do something different or go to a new destination. Say, *I want a different career, lose 30 pounds, or run a marathon.* When someone agrees to accompany you, you are less likely to back out. And, your supporters may have hidden talents or connections that help you arrive at the destination.



Two weeks later Susan arrived in Madrid. The next morning we were on a train to Pamplona, then traveled 27 miles to Roncesvalles, the town on the border of France and Spain where the *Camino* originates. I then realized, "It's a long way back to Pamplona. This is crazy." I thought of quitting then and there. Many journeys end before the first step is taken, so people never get to their destinations.

Lesson 4: Every journey begins with the first step. Often when you look at the destination, you feel overwhelmed. But you'll never arrive at the destination if you don't take the first step and reach the first milestone. Milestones move you in the right direction. With each one, you're closer to your goal.

When we arrived in Roncesvalles, we met two Canadians, Christine and Judy. As they displayed their gear and big packs, I wondered if we were ready for the *Camino*. However, the next day I saw Christine and Judy struggling with their heavy packs. Within days, they got rid of half their gear.

Lesson 5: Pack light. You may think that you've figured out all of the rules to win the game—only to learn that some of the rules have changed. You can't assume that what got you to

where you are today—your skills, beliefs, and assumptions—will move you to where you want to be in the future. You must discard some things that made you successful in the past to create room to build new capability.

When we met with other *pilgrims*, the questions began: "Where are you from?" "Are you going to Santiago?" At first, Susan and I didn't plan to go to Santiago, only as far as we could in two weeks. But when asked, "Are you going to Santiago?" my soul responded, "Yes, I am going to Santiago!" We then committed to this final destination.

Lesson 6: Commit to going and go! When you look at your final destination, you may get stuck. The distance seems too far, the work so great. You wonder whether you should stay or go. Staying stuck is as much of a decision as deciding to move forward. Without commitment to the destination, your chances of success are slim.

As I started walking with the taller Susan, I noticed that I couldn't match her long stride, and it was difficult for her to slow down. We realized that walking together would be futile. We'd have to walk separately, each at her own pace, yet still arrive together.

Lesson 7: Everyone walks at a different pace—work with it. As you move toward your destination, some people may take a different pace or approach. Go at your own pace, respect the differences, and work with them.

Susan and I agreed on *three guiding principles* to walk together while walking separately. If we hadn't agreed on them, we could have easily separated.

First, every night, we looked at our map and planned the next day. **Lesson 8: To get to the destination, agree on your milestones.** Every morning, we agreed on the place to meet and pledged that no matter how tired we were, we'd get to that location.

Second, we communicated a lot. **Lesson 9: Communicate, communicate, and communicate again.** We had a ritual of a morning coffee—a time when we would check in with how each other was doing, offer each other encouragement, and stay connected.

Third, we followed yellow arrows, the markers along the *Camino*. If we missed a marker, we'd backtrack.

Lesson 10: Find the yellow arrows and move forward. Set small, achievable goals. Baby steps become journeys. Ask, "What will I do today to move in the right direction?" Tell everyone about the milestones to maintain focus and motivation. Look for the signs or markers that you're moving in the

right direction and follow them. Know when it is time to move to your next destination. I woke up every morning at five and took an ibuprofen to prepare my feet for pain from 16 blisters. After coffee, I walked until I arrived at the agreed *refugio* and found the bed that Susan had reserved for me.

After about 12 days on the *Camino*, I called Joe and asked him to meet me in Burgos. Seeking sympathy, I told him about my trials and pain. He replied, "It wouldn't be a pilgrimage if it weren't challenging." I thought, "You don't understand!" But he did! This became our mantra.

Lesson 11: It wouldn't be a pilgrimage if it weren't challenging. If you think getting to the destination will be easy, think again. You can pick the destination and follow the markers, but it won't be easy to keep on the path and not give up.

Leaving Burgos we entered the most challenging stretch of the *Camino*. The long distance between Burgos and Leon was flat, hot, and covered with wheat fields, which drew me back to my difficult childhood. I contemplated that if the *Camino* was a metaphor for life, my life was about pain and being alone. I was in terrible pain—and I saw nobody in front of me or behind me. I felt hurt and angry. I cried, "Why is my life so filled with pain? I just can't do this, if I am going to be alone through all of this pain."

At this moment, I heard, "¡Buen Camino!" I turned and saw an older woman. I said to her, "I am ready to die." She said, "It's not your day to die. I am here to walk with you." I believe that God worked through her.

Lesson 12: Support comes when you least expect it and from the most unlikely places. All journeys have moments of despair. The level of despair varies by how difficult the journey is. In moments when you think you can't go one step further and you are ready to give up, you must have faith that the support you need will materialize. Since the *Camino*, I've seen such assistance show up for many people.

From that moment, I decided that my *Camino* was no longer going to be one focused on pain. When someone asked how my feet were doing, I simply answered that they were fine. I decided *not to share my pain* with everyone but to enjoy what was going on around me and walk to the next town.

In the next *refugio*, the *hospitalera* told

me that something was wrong with my feet. A cobbler looked at my boots and said that the insoles were the wrong size. He created new ones for me. Next, a pharmacist told me that I was allergic to the tape that held the gauze patches in place. She gave me cream and a hypoallergenic tape. Then, I was told that my feet needed more air, and so I was told to cushion my sandals with sanitary napkins.

Lesson 13: To get to the destination, you need to innovate. Look for ideas that are outside of your comfort zone. I felt silly when I put sanitary napkins in my sandals, but it felt so good that I didn't care what anybody else thought. Again, you can't always count on the things that got you to your current destination to get you to the next. You may have to talk with different people, try unusual things, and read something new to get the idea that will move you one step closer to goal.

After we had walked 400 miles, busloads of teenagers started showing up to walk the last 100 kilometers (about 60 miles) just to pick up a certificate. Annoyingly, they'd sprint ahead to reserve the beds. We wished that they'd go away, but they didn't—so we adapted by learning where they'd stop and walking to a different location.

Lesson 14: All journeys involve nuisances along the road. By accepting them, you can get to the destination, regardless of differing intentions. The road needs to be wide enough for all people to reach the destination, and wider still so that you can give way to those who might upset you. After all, the *Camino* is different for everybody.

When we arrived in Santiago, we went to the cathedral. I fell down and started to cry. Along the path, I'd carried the ultrasounds of the two children that I had miscarried. I wrote a letter to St. James, put their pictures with the letter, and turned their souls over to his care. I then had an incredible feeling of hope and knew that I would have children.

Although your *Santiago* is different, getting to the destination is possible if you heed the *Camino's* lessons. Today, I have a husband who supports me in every journey I take. And, I have two beautiful daughters, Savannah and Fiona. Ultimately, I learned **Lesson 15: Count your blessings—not your blisters.** LE

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ACTION: Record the lessons in your journey.

