



## Meet my Leadership Coach, The Jigsaw Puzzle

### *What this pastime can teach us about leadership*

by Elizabeth J. Agnew, MS

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As my dad and I poured over our 1500-piece sailboat jigsaw puzzle one holiday break, the metaphors between what we were doing and true leadership ran continuously through my mind. I'm amazed at what paying attention to these metaphors can teach us about our own leadership qualities and how to run a team or business.

Here are four concepts integral to leadership that I found buried in that puzzle box.

#### 1. **Accepting impermanence**

At any moment, a 3-year-old could come on by and, while thinking she's helping, systematically dismantle the border of your puzzle, like my niece Grace Anna did. It's amazing how long it took us to put together the first time, and how quickly we reassembled it the second time.

Impermanence also shows up when the puzzle has been completed. You may leave it around for a day or two to admire your production, but after that you destroy it, only to shelve and forget about it for long enough that would be a challenge to reassemble.

We tend to get attached and want things to stay how they are, or bogged down by wanting to stay on top of all possible information. Comfort overtakes creativity and growth. We can counteract this by accepting – even embracing – the impermanence of our relationships, projects, business, and ultimately our lives. This act, paradoxically, is what fosters growth, creativity, and love.

#### 2. **A perfect fit comes with a satisfying click**

This is my favorite analogy. As my dad and I were working, he kept finding pieces that were so close to fitting but were not quite a perfect match. In a mock I'm-so-fed-up-with-this voice, he'd bark "get me my hammer!" ostensibly so that he could *make* it fit. Thing is, that would just cause more misfit pieces later on.

Needless to say, my dad doesn't stand alone in his desire to force things to work out when they clearly aren't.

Sometimes the opposite happened; I would be 90% sure the piece fit, but I held it up to the light just to make sure there weren't any gaps. Sometimes a perfect fit leaves us skeptical and requires closer inspection.

However, most times, the pieces fell into place with an easy yet tangible, all-too-satisfying click.

Some relationships and connections clearly don't fit and we've been known to think that as leaders it's our job to get out our proverbial hammers and make things work. Yeah, and we've seen how well THAT works. Other situations warrant closer inspection under a bright light. And when the connections are right, we'll notice our own version of the 'click' – that is, if we're paying attention.

### 3. The ability to scope and focus

It was hard to choose an area of the puzzle to work on, especially when we were just getting started. There was too much to do! But as you can imagine, when we tried, out of hasty overwhelm, to work on the whole puzzle at once, our rate of connecting pieces dwindled greatly compared to when we each committed to a certain area.

Part of the hesitation for committing was the initial time investment of gathering all of those like-colored pieces from the bottomless pile, half of which were upside down! Focusing on a project or area of your business requires the same initial investment.

I naturally chose the easiest areas first and saved the fine-patterned areas like skies, mountains, and trees until the end. It's funny, because as the easier areas came together, the harder ones then didn't seem so hard, as if I was more ready for them, or understood them better in the context of the completed areas.

It's harder to make the critical leadership decision to scope your business or project and focus in on just one part at a time, especially when things are just getting started because there's so much to think about. Doing so, though, forces you to choose the most relevant from an endless pile of information (half of which is upside down, remember).

This also enables you to progress faster, and perhaps more importantly, to *feel* the progress you're making so that your momentum continues. Start on the easier, more attainable areas and see how they come to inform the vaguer, less-defined areas as progress unfolds.

### 4. Pieces as parts of the whole

As my dad and I worked, each piece (especially the nondescript ones) seemed so insignificant. But even if one piece was missing among the 1500 of them, it would have resulted in an incomplete product. Each piece was individually hand-laid to produce the final product and so each piece was critical. Yet at the same time, each piece was nothing without the context brought by its surrounding pieces.

As leaders, we take action every day to achieve our vision, laying in one or two seemingly insignificant puzzle pieces. Without consideration of the final product and how our small step fits into it, we can become discouraged by a feeling of not having done enough at the end of each day. In other words, each action, devoid of its place in the bigger picture, may not seem to make a difference. Over time though, what a picture you will have constructed with all those tiny pieces!

Puzzles are relaxing and meditative. We maintain a trance-like interest, yet without the urge to rush. We desire the end state of having a completed picture, and that pulls us forward. Ironic, because it's the means to the end that we relish in.

Leadership, on the other hand, usually isn't quite so relaxing and meditative. Does that mean it can't be? Why don't we relish in the means to the end? Why do we fixate on the end and berate ourselves for not being there sooner?

If we weren't *so attached* then maybe the means would be as rewarding as the end. If we looked for and tolerated *only perfect fits*, we wouldn't waste our time on the wrong stuff. If we took the effort to scope our projects and *focus on one thing at a time*, we'd get the right stuff done. If we saw the pieces as parts of the whole, maybe we'd have more perspective.

Maybe leadership *could actually be* as therapeutic as a jigsaw puzzle.



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Liz works with individuals and organizations in technical fields needing tailored leadership development that speaks their language. Liz has logged hundreds of hours coaching individuals from companies such as Jet Propulsion Laboratories, Google, HP, SETI, Lockheed Martin, VNUS and Sun Microsystems. Her background includes experience in adult education, team facilitation, and public speaking. She offers complimentary coaching consultations – call or email today to schedule yours.