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Follow the Leader

On 13 January 1982 Air Florida Flight 90 from Washington D.C. to Fort Lauderdale crashed into the Potomac river, killing 74 people. As often occurs in airplane crashes, human error played a major part in this avoidable disaster: in this case, poor communication between Captain Larry Wheaton and his First Officer Roger Pettit.

Crash investigators listening to the cockpit conversations between Wheaton and Pettit heard the following exchange:

First Officer Pettit

God, look at that thing. That doesn't seem right, does it? Uh, that's not right.

Captain Wheaton

Yes it is...

First Officer Pettit

No, I don't think that's right. Ah, maybe it is.

And moments later:

First Officer Pettit

Larry, we're going down Larry.

Captain Wheaton

I know it.

These were the last words spoken by the two pilots. So what exactly happened in the cockpit of Flight 90 that day? First Officer Pettit clearly saw something on an instrument that didn't look right to him, but quickly deferred to the greater experience of his captain. Unfortunately, he was right and his captain was wrong - a classic example of how members of teams often 'follow the leader'. And how leaders often fail to see how their perceived status and expertise can influence those around them.

Research indicates that 'follow the leader' is not confined to air travel. It frequently occurs in hospitals, where nurses often defer to the instructions of senior doctors, even when all their experience and knowledge tells them that the doctor can't be right. And, of course, it happens in offices with managers and their team members.

Managers need to be aware that team members have this tendency to stay silent and follow their leaders. Good leaders know that an important part of their job is asking for and listening to the opinions of others - and creating an environment where people feel comfortable giving their points of view. In offices where managers do not receive or listen to this input, poor decisions and avoidable errors quickly multiply. Two pairs of eyes are always likely to see more than a single pair.

Great leaders have never been afraid to surround themselves with the best and brightest talent available - or with people who may disagree with them. Managers, then, should not see collaborative leadership as a threat to their authority, but rather as the mark of a competent and confident leader. And it also happens to be the best way of getting most decisions right most of the time.

If you're still not convinced, just listen to a trio of former US presidents who knew more than a thing or two about leadership. Here's Theodore Roosevelt: 'People ask the difference between a leader and a boss – The leader works in the open, and the boss in covert. The leader leads and the boss drives.' Or how about Harry Truman: 'It's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit.' But we'd like to finish with our favourite quote, from Woodrow Wilson: 'I not only use all the brains I have, but all I can borrow.' We're with you on this one, Woodrow. After all, who doesn't need a bit more brain power?

Like to learn more about leadership? Just sign up for one of our new courses: ***Beginning to Lead, Leading in the 21st Century*** , or ***Managing Successfully in International Environments***.

READ MATTHEWS INTERNATIONAL Lope de Vega 36, 28014 Madrid, Spain

e-mail: rm@readmatthews.com - **Voice:** (+34) 914 292 115 - **Fax:** (+34) 913 691 965

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