

**The Serum Run Expedition**

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**Authors Note**

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### **Abstract**

For many years the Norman Vaughn Serum Run 25 was a non-profit organization that operated as an expedition company in Alaska. The organization was tasked with planning and executing a bi-annual 700-mile trip from Nenana to Nome, Alaska, by dog sled and snow machine for adventurers. By 2012 the organization was defunct. In 2019 this author revived the organization's framework from the founders as part of his master's degree internship progress at Liberty University and was tasked to plan an expedition in February 2020. He re-organized the company and registered the business. Right away, the organization was rife with problems. Even though the adventures made it to Nome in early March 2020, glaring issues need to be addressed before another trip is planned. They are team management, strategic decision making, and group dynamics. Teams are pivotal organizational structures. Their importance has prompted researchers to study what organizations can do to gain a competitive advantage and better understand their effectiveness. Groups and teams need the right balance to ensure that the group's behavior can be controlled to best optimize high performance and goal attainment. Additionally, business managers are tasked with making informed and strategic decisions on their organization's many tasks. Finding the most effective model to arrive at a conclusion that will be most beneficial for the organization can be implemented through proven models such as game theory and Vroom-Yetton-Jago model. Furthermore, teams and decisions in an expedition setting should be fluid and dynamic. A successful expedition requires technical ability and the ability to get along with others. Many expeditions are unsuccessful because attention is not directed toward group members' dynamics.

*Keywords:* Organizational behavior, team management, strategic decision making, group dynamics, expedition planning, expedition behavior.

### **Identification of Issues**

In 1925 the residents of Nome, Alaska, were facing an epidemic. This was a time of rapid technological expansion. The railroad was running in Alaska in the southern parts of the state, and the airplane had just come online, and air flight was still in its infancy. There were steamships, but they could not travel in the icy seas in the middle of an Alaskan winter. Diphtheria started to take hold, and the mayor of the gold rush town needed to act fast. He sent out a telegram requesting help, and before long, a relay to carry lifesaving serum was underway. The medicine was delivered by train from Anchorage to Nenana and then picked up by a sled dog team, and the serum hopped down the trail, using dog teams. The medicine was handed off in the villages to the next dog team, and it made its way to Nome. This relay became known as the 'Race for Mercy' or its better-known name, the Serum Run.

In the early 1990s, Alaska was a much different place, and there is a sled dog race called the Iditarod that pays homage to the Serum Run that travels much of the same trail as the relay. One of those Iditarod racers was a polar explorer and Mount Everest climber Colonel Norman Vaughn. He and a group of dedicated adventurers wanted to bring the Serum Run back, and they started doing expeditions, bi-annually, re-tracing the original route. This non-profit, The Norman Vaughn Serum Run 25 organization, made about a dozen trips like this through Alaska, often doing service projects along the remote villages. Over time they built up many relationships with the native villages, and everyone was always excited to see this group re-tracing and acknowledging the history of their elders.

By 2012, Vaughn was no longer part of the organization as he had passed away several years before, but the non-profit was still running. By this time, this author, Robert Forto, had moved to Alaska and became sled dog kennel partners with the mushing coordinator and de-

facto leader of the non-profit. The nonprofit group, without this author, made one final run in the winter of 2012. Afterward, this author was essentially handed over the organization because of much inner-turmoil and other logistical problems, and the organizers wanted to move on and stop offering the trips. In short, the organization was in shambles. Of course, it was always a dream for this author to run across Alaska by dog team, and he jumped at the chance to take over the reins. Even though he had been a small business owner since 1994, he had no non-profit experience and no real understanding of native culture in Alaska.

This author and the original organizer parted ways. She became embattled in a nasty divorce proceeding, in which her husband was also on the board of the organization. Little communication would take place moving forward with anyone involved before. This author had a book of scribbled notes and testimonies of those who had traveled the trail before, and that was about it. This author was inheriting an organization in shambles, but that is just the beginning. Over the next eight years, this author worked tirelessly to make this dream of resurrecting not only the Serum Run expedition itself but the organization, too. He returned to college and earned a second bachelor's degree in outdoor leadership from the University of Alaska Anchorage. When he graduated, he developed and taught a course called the Winter Multi-Sport Expedition, which was just a proving ground for what was to come for future expeditions. He also enrolled in the Sports Management Outdoor Adventure Sports program at Liberty University, and his internship in 2019-2020 was to develop and implement this expedition. It was a unique opportunity but one that he had been thinking about for years. Rarely do you see degree programs that allow students to use their studies as a research platform for their endeavors. But this author was not a traditional student. Already middle-aged, he did not fit into the career path for many of his peers in his degree program, so he wanted to find a way to learn by doing. This

author had what he thought was a firm grip on the leadership skills necessary. He has spent decades in the outdoors with other outdoor enthusiasts. But assembling a team to try to return the Serum Run to its glory days proved to be a near disaster.

By the early fall of 2020, a group of 16 adventurers had signed on to make the trip to Nome. The February 2020 expedition would start in Nenana and just like the original Serum Run in 1925, and as many others had in the years to before. They would stop in the original villages and do community service projects along the way, including having the veterinarian on the trip providing vaccines to dogs. What started as an exciting trip planning adventure quickly escalated into much more. Looking back, several issues arose. They will be the focus of this paper. They are team management, strategic decision making, and group dynamics. Teams are pivotal organizational structures. Their importance has prompted researchers to study what organizations can do to gain a competitive advantage and better understand their effectiveness. Groups and teams need the right balance to ensure that the group's behavior can be controlled to best optimize high performance and goal attainment.

### **Analysis and Evaluation**

The fundamental issue is strategic decision-making. Scott and Davis (2016) argue that instead of focusing on the day-to-day decisions made in organizations, we should concentrate on those critical decisions, resulting in a change in the structure itself. (p. 74) This was one of the first and most impactful problems with planning this expedition. This author started by saying, this will be entirely a group effort, and all of the decisions made will be made as a collective. There will be no formal structure that is seen within a rational system organization, but rather a very loose natural system approach. By doing so, it put everyone in the group on equal footing. While this organizational structure could work well, it should not when everyone has personal

agendas to move forward. It is important to note that this group that was chosen were all very experienced outdoor adventurers very capable of doing the trip. Still, nobody wanted to act as the leader.

A study by Pollanen, Abdel-Maksoud, Elbanna, & Mahama (2017) examined the relationship between strategic performance measures, strategic decision making, and organizational performance. As Scott and Davis (2017) argue, Pollanen et al. (2017) found that integration of a long-term strategy and operational goals, multi-perspective indicators, the inclusion of cause-effect linkages, and the presence of a sequence of goal-tangents-action plans can help organizations achieve their strategic objectives. This, along with the alignment of individual behaviors and attitudes with strategic objectives, will ultimately enhance organizational performance. (Pollanen et al. 2017) Moreover, finding the most effective model to arrive at a decision that will be the most beneficial for the organization can be implemented through proven models such as game theory and the Vroom-Yetton-Jago model. The game theory model allows managers to analyze their decision by looking at it through various perspectives. (Abapour, Nazari-Heris, Mohammadi-Ivatloo, & Mehrdad, 2018) This process is effective because decisions are often not just a game of chance. Most decisions that managers make have a prescribed set of “rules” to follow, and decisions can be based on those rules and the data.

Another model is the Vroom-Yetton-Jago model, which depends on an optimal degree of participation in managerial decisions and relies on the presence of a “one size fits all” solution. (Lührs, Jager, Challies, & Newig, 2018) This group-centric thinking process tends to work well for decisions where outcomes will require an alternative approach. The planning for the Serum Run expedition fits within both of these models of decision-making. What went wrong, however,

is the approach that this author proposed. First and foremost, there was an inherent lack of wisdom toward the gravity of decisions that needed to be made for the group. This author had planned and executed many expeditions over the years, but none of this magnitude or breadth. He would need to recognize that planning for potentially life-threatening decisions such as minus fifty-degree temperatures and teams getting lost on the trail was much more important than the day-to-day choices that Scott and Davis (2016) speak of. The group spent an excessive amount of time arguing about subtle details that effectively did not matter in a larger scheme of things for the trip. An example that took hours to reach a consensus on was whether the group should stay at a mutual friend's homestead on the trail for free or pay for a night in a roadhouse for a couple of hundred dollars. The adamant voice had her agenda to stay with her friends because they have not seen each other for 20 years. In hindsight, those decisions cost the team dearly during the trip. From a biblical perspective, James 1:5 (NIV) can give guidance as the passage suggests that if you lack wisdom, ask God who will give to all generously without reproach. The group should have heeded that advice.

From an organizational stance, managers must know how to scrutinize the decision-making process and determine what decision will be made to provide an optimal result. As organizational managers, it is essential to have a firm grasp on what can be done to make the most strategic decisions moving forward. Scott and Davis (2016) suggest it is within this management mode that allows leaders to protect distinctive values and create a social structure that embodies the organization. This was not done on the Serum Run expedition trip.

The other two issues to analyze in the Serum Run organization are team management and group dynamics. These two issues can go hand in hand in discerning what went wrong in this organization. Scott and Davis (2016) postulate that coordination mechanisms are imperative to

effective organizational management. Nadler and Tishman (1988; as cited in Scott and Davis 2016) identify four different strategic grouping bases. They are grouping by activity, grouping by output, grouping by a user, and grouping by foci (or by two or more of the previous criteria). (Scott and Davis, 2016, p. 130) These groupings have a set of tradeoffs, and each group allows for the better use of resources and sharing of skill sets, but this also implies inter-unit cooperation. (Scott and Davis 2016, p. 130) This was one of the most significant issues within the Serum Run expedition organization and on the trip itself.

The work of McCraty (2017) studied the importance of social coherence among colleagues and collaborators. Coherence always implies correlations, connectedness, consistency, efficient energy utilization, and what is referred to as a global order, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. (McCraty, 2017) This goes back to the Vroom-Yetton-Jago model, which depends on an optimal degree of participation among the group members. Moreover, Theobald, Eddy, Grunspan, Wiggins, & Crowe (2017) found groups that operate at suboptimal efficiency often devolve into poorly functioning groups. This inequitable participation between group members may be particularly damaging because it stunts team productivity in the workplace. (Theobald et al., 2017)

The contingency theory works well in team-building and group dynamics. This theory states that organizational effectiveness results from the organization's ability to fit characteristics, or environmental factors, to the contingencies that reflect its situation. (Donaldson, 2001; as cited in McAdam, Miller, & McSorley, 2019) The idea, again, goes back to the Vroom-Yetton-Jago model, that there is no one best way to lead an organization, and there are myriad internal and external factors that will determine the best way to lead. (Vidal, Campdesuñer, Rodríguez, Vivar, 2017) By aligning these contingency variables, an organization

can seek to improve its performance. This alignment fits well with what Scott and Davis (2016) propose by employing multiple foci in terms of group dynamics, it will support attention to diverse objectives and allow more robust and frictionless exchanges in the group. These exchanges can then develop structural modifications to the group that provides for the best outcomes. These modifications include the development of staff (or group member) roles, liaison roles, task forces, and project teams. (Scott and Davis, 2016) Furthermore, Edmondson & Harvey (2018) found that cross-boundary teaming within the organization is a strategy for innovation. By having knowledge density within the team, it will expand the range of views and ideas that teams can draw upon to innovate. (Edmondson, & Harvey, 2018) However, this practice, and as seen within the Serum Run expedition organization, are difficult in practice, and innovation is not always realized.

There is a plethora of research on team building and group dynamics. Organizations can rely on the literature to support congruent views of the best practices to implement their given goals and objectives. From a biblical perspective, 1 Corinthians 12:17-20 (NIV) says that the best teams do not have people with similar skills, but they combine the diverse talents and backgrounds from a pool of diverse individuals and appreciate the gifts each one brings. While this was true in the serum organization, these great people did not know their role or appreciate the other group members.

### **Personal Perspective and Solutions**

Merida (2015) postulates that we should seek biblical witness as we look toward a Christian perspective toward leadership, whether from an organizational or management viewpoint. In 1 Kings, Merida examined the knotty context of succession and the struggle between King David and his two sons. This transfer or succession introduces us to Solomon, and

therein lies a very dramatic story of rebellion, manipulation, jealousy, broken promises, and revenge. Interestingly, but not at all surprising, all of these issues arose during the implementation of the Serum Run expedition and have been the subject of much research ever since. Even though the group did make it to their destination, Nome, Alaska, the team and its leadership was a tattered form of itself by the time they arrived. Many in the initial group of 16 had pulled out early for various reasons. What was supposed to be a trip of a lifetime, a dream come true for many of the participants, this author included, became an exposé of poor leadership, management pitfalls, and organizational dysfunction. Looking back, while most of the safety and risk management decisions were sound, it was the logistical and personal relationship issues where most of the pitfalls lied. As mentioned herein, it is unusual for a graduate student to study real-life problems and use his schooling to find solutions, which is precisely what makes this doctorate program such a unique challenge. It has genuinely allowed this author the opportunity to learn from his mistakes and move forward with a much better understanding of strategic leadership and management.

In conclusion, as the problems organizations face grow in complexity, cross-boundary teaming is a solution that can be used. Teams are vital to production and innovation, and groups are more likely than individuals to develop innovative solutions. (Uzzi, Mukherjee, Stringer, & Jones, 2013; as cited in Edmondson, & Harvey, 2018) When diverse experts can overcome their differences in understanding and interests, and create value, remains an area in need of both theoretical and practical advances. (Edmondson, & Harvey, 2018) Moreover, innovation in teams and groups will continue to face a unique set of challenges due to the novelty and uncertainty that is core to the definition of innovation and the enigmatic nature of idea generation and implementation processes. (Thayer, Petruzzelli, & McClurg, 2018) This is true in both the

currently scholarly literature and for this author as he moves forward in contemplating what is to come with the Serum Run organization in the future. A closing thought is a reminder that faithful leaders exercise good judgment, influential decision-making, and godly wisdom. (1 Kings 3:16-28)

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