

This month's Tip: Apollo 11. Leading Teams with a compelling direction.

Over the past few weeks you have no doubt seen some of the coverage of the 40th anniversary of landing on the moon. You may have noticed that much of the coverage has focused on how such a difficult goal could only be achieved through teamwork.

One thing that struck me was the compelling direction that President Kennedy gave the NASA team in his speech in May 1961, declaring:

"I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth. No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish."

In his book, '[Leading Teams](#)', Richard Hackman argues that, in all successful teams, leaders set a direction for their team which is **clear, challenging** and **compelling**. I would also add that they present the direction with impact as Kennedy did.

Kennedy's goal was **clear** - notice he didn't simply give the goal of landing on the moon it was landing on the moon and returning safely to earth. This clarity served to mobilise attention. (In previous tips we have commented that you need to be careful what you wish for when setting goals.)

Kennedy also provided clarity around the timescale associated with the goal. Without the 'before this decade is out' time limit NASA would arguably have taken far longer to achieve the goal.

The goal was **challenging** with a real chance of both success and failure. Hackman suggests that a goal needs around a 50/50 chance of success to be truly challenging and, of course, there were tragedies along the way to the success of Apollo 11.

Finally, the goal was **compelling**, invoking the importance for mankind as well as for the USA and so emotionally engaging for all those involved. It was also compelling because it was made clear that the means would be provided, but the NASA team had to figure out the way to do it. Clearly they would also be held accountable and the missions would be very open to public scrutiny.

I am reminded of a story, that you may have heard, about a visitor who was touring NASA during the heyday of the manned space programme. The visitor met various engineers. When he asked them what they were doing, they replied, "We are helping to put a man on the moon." On his way out he passed a janitor who was sweeping. When the visitor asked the janitor what he was doing there, the janitor replied, "I am helping to put a man on the moon." Everyone in the program was focused on the mission. That's real employee engagement, isn't it?

Forty years on I believe there are still powerful lessons that we can take from Kennedy's 'Man on the Moon' goal when thinking about our work, our goals and those of our team.

How engaged are we at a personal level? How engaged is our team?

Do we have a clear, challenging and compelling direction? Do we set a clear, challenging and compelling direction for others?

Food for thought? For more hints and tips go to www.iridiumconsulting.co.uk/links.html.