

This week, our travel group visited the famous warship Vasa, which is displayed proudly in the Swedish capital of Stockholm despite its storied and somewhat embarrassing history. The story of the Vasa is multifaceted, but a few key details stood out to us. Given that we were on this trip from a business perspective, we could not help but notice that there are business lessons in the history of the warship Vasa. So, first, let's take a brief walk through the story of the Vasa, and then share lessons learned that are applicable to in modern business.

The ship was commissioned in the 1620s and was finished in 1628. It was meant to be one of the most awe-inspiring and technologically advanced ships of its era, with several historians estimating that it represented about 25% of Sweden's GDP at the time. The highly ornate and technologically advanced ship was designed with input from the King himself.

In the end, the ship sank within 20 minutes of its maiden voyage. It was not wide enough and did not have enough stone in the ballast to weigh it down, making it unstable. When it failed a stability test, the crew opted to sail anyway, knowing that the King was expecting the ship and that he would be furious if the ship, after years of work, did not sail and ultimately arrive at its first destination on the scheduled timeframe. Because the boat sank almost immediately, most of the crew was able to be rescued, though historians estimate that two to three dozen crew members died for any number of reasons.

So, what lessons in business and leadership can we learn from the story of the Vasa?

- 1) Be mindful of the shadow you cast as a leader: None of the members of the crew of that ship wanted to set sail. It had failed a standard stability test and it was not seaworthy. But, the King's rule was not to be questioned, so, they sailed anyway, which was a waste of the Kingdom's resources and which of course cost several young folks their lives during that fateful maiden voyage.
- 2) Good communication is important when collaborating cross-functionally. It was noted that Danish and Swedes were using different measuring sticks eliminating a standard for design and construction. Because it was such an ambitious project, several teams attempted to work together, which ultimately resulted in a ship that checked many boxes and looked impressive but was not seaworthy.
- 3) Use subject matter experts: The King himself played a key role in designing the ship, yet the King did not have the engineering or shipbuilding background necessary to build such an ambitious ship. His own absolute authority meant that shipbuilders who may have had reservations did not or could not speak up about expected problems.

With this in mind, leaders should look to history for lessons that can be applied to both business and life. We are grateful to the people of Sweden and to those who have worked on the project to preserve and restore the Vasa for allowing us to be inspired by this piece of history.

Michael Bowen

Jonathan Kipnis

Kumar Mahalingam

Veronica Mak

Adam Sharkey