

HANDOUT



TONE AND LEADERSHIP: THE *JULIA ANN* AND THE *MÉDUSE*

The United Nations estimates that at least three million ships have wrecked over the course of history. In fortunate cases, people survive. They may be left floating on debris or in lifeboats until they are rescued. Others may make it to land. Even if people make it to land, there is no guarantee of survival. Many challenges will remain.

Shipwreck survivors—also called castaways—often need to create a temporary society until they are rescued. Some of these temporary societies have functioned quite well. Others have failed abysmally. The societies that succeeded often began with a tone of cooperation, fairness, and decency. This tone usually emanated from leadership, but was shared by the majority of the castaways.

In a way, we can think of the castaway's leadership as setting their society's foundational tone.

To understand how leadership and tone have worked in practice, let's look at two shipwrecks. These wrecks had very different leaders who set very different tones. The wrecks, ultimately, had very different outcomes.

SUCCESS AND THE *JULIA ANN*

First, let's consider the 1855 wreck of the *Julia Ann*. The *Julia Ann* set sail from Australia on September 7th, en route to the United States. Over half of

the ship's passengers were Mormons, who had arranged to take residence in Utah.

The ship's captain, Benjamin F. Pond, was no stranger to the sea. In fact, he captained a similar journey a few years earlier, transporting a boatload of Mormons to the United States. When more Australian Mormons were looking to emigrate to the United States, they sought out Pond due to the experience of the first voyage. Mormons had remarked about the kindness of Pond and his crew.

About a month into the voyage, on October 4th, a faulty map led the *Julia Ann* to hit a coral reef on the Scilly Islands, near Tahiti. From the moment disaster struck, Captain Pond set a tone that would guide the castaways towards survival and their eventual rescue.

With the boat capsized against the reef, Captain Pond and the crew tied a rope to an emerging rock. The makeshift guideline was used to help evacuate passengers before the ship broke apart.

During the rescue, the second mate took it upon himself to salvage a bag of the captain's gold. Captain Pond ordered the mate to abandon the gold and carry a girl ashore instead. This order strongly signalled the tone that Pond was setting.

Another incident during the initial rescue was more questionable, but noteworthy in how it reinforced the tone Pond was setting. In Pond's eyes, the vulnerable should be the first priority, especially over self-interest. The crew discovered that a passenger abandoned his family inside the boat and made it to the rock on his own. Upon learning of what the man had done, the crew threw him back in the ocean. He managed to swim back, helped along by a wave. At this point he was allowed to stay.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the *Méduse* crew didn't save time. Rather, they ran aground on a sandbank 50 kilometres off the coast of Mauritania, in the Bay of Arguin. The area is known as the Bank of Arguin.

The captain and his associates first planned to ferry the ship's passengers to land using the ship's lifeboats. However, the French-appointed governor of Senegal feared that the *Méduse* would break up before a ferrying operation could be completed. He concocted a scheme to use parts from the ship to build a large raft, 140 metres square. The raft would hold about half of the ship's passengers. They would tie it to the lifeboats, and everyone would be delivered safely to land.

The raft, however, was rickety and nobody wanted to board it. The leadership had to force about 150 crew and soldiers, including one woman, onto the rickety raft at gunpoint. About 250 others boarded the lifeboats. Captain Chaumareys was carried onto one in his favourite armchair. Many lifeboat seats

were taken up with bags of luxury goods. Seventeen crew members remained on the marooned ship.

After making it a few kilometres towards shore, the upper brass in the lifeboats decided that pulling the raft was slowing them down and jeopardizing their chances of survival. They ordered the raft be cut loose, despite desperate pleas from the people on the raft.

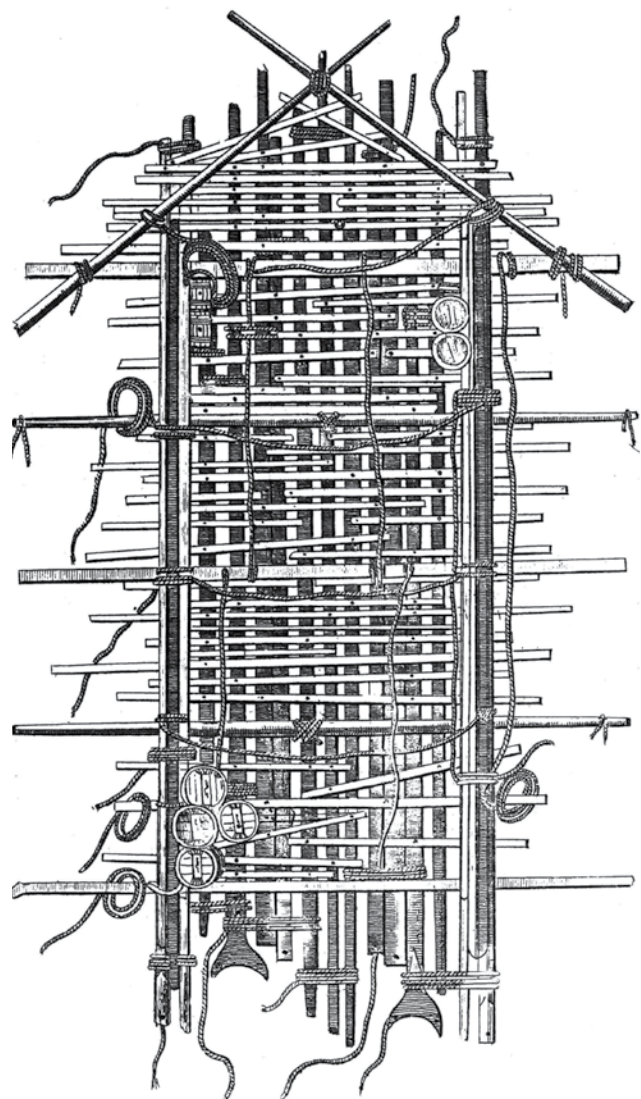
The lifeboats safely continued to shore. Once on the mainland, the survivors carried on to Senegal over land.

Meanwhile, the raft was a scene of pure chaos. Fights broke out as passengers clamoured for the safety of the raft's centre, the weakest were thrown overboard to preserve the limited rations, and when deep hunger set in some passengers resorted to cannibalism. The people on the raft were exposed to the elements and the worst imaginable human behaviour. After drifting for 13 days, one of the boats from the French fleet—a boat that had followed the proper route to



Over the course of 1818-1819, French painter Théodore Géricault created *The Raft of the Medusa*, a horrifying depiction of the raft at sea. To create the painting, he built a model of the raft and interviewed survivors. The painting was seen by some to be a commentary on French aristocracy.

Photo Credit: Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons



Plan of the Raft of Medusa, created by survivor Alexandre Corréard.

Photo Credit: Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

Senegal—spotted the raft. When the ship made it over to the raft, they found only 15 men left alive.

Adding to the horror, almost two months after the *Méduse* ran aground, Chaumareys sent a salvage operation to the wreck site. He believed that valuables would be found at the sand bank where the boat had been left to break apart. However, the salvagers found something even more astonishing than a few chests of treasure. The *Méduse*, miraculously, did

not break apart. Inside it were three men, having lived 54 days on the beached wreck.

When news of this horrible event spread across France, outrage ensued. Chaumareys ended up in court, and received a three-year jail sentence. He got off lucky: the maximum sentence possible for his crimes was a life sentence.

WHY TONE AND LEADERSHIP MATTER

We should always be careful about pointing to a single cause for most any disaster, especially in situations where many interconnected factors are at play. That understood, the very divergent outcomes of the *Méduse* and the *Julia Ann* suggest that similar situations can go in very different directions. The tone and leadership that was established at the outset in each of these disasters played a pivotal role. It is quite possible that most everyone could have survived the wreck of the *Méduse* and the wreck of the *Julia Ann*. Yet it was only the *Julia Ann* that ended happily.

Why would this be? One reason is that Captain Pond exhibited caring and cooperation. Meanwhile, Captain Chaumareys exhibited arrogance and selfishness. In fact, Pond has become something of a legend in Mormon community lore. Meanwhile, Chaumareys has become associated with incompetence and cruelty, having inspired one of France's most famous paintings.

The idea that leadership and tone are important is not just relevant to the outcomes of shipwrecks. This idea is important to the outcomes of societies. The Captain Chaumareys approach—blind self-interest that leaves countless people adrift and fighting to survive—stands in sharp contrast to the Captain Pond approach—kindness and “brotherhood” that values people over money, and pays attention to the vulnerable.

Which kind of society would you rather be a part of?

DISCUSS

1. Consider Captain Pond's leadership. What does it tell us about prioritising the needs of the vulnerable? What does it tell us about the "value" of money?
2. Consider the failings of Captain Chaumareys. What does it tell us about the risks of blind self-interest?
3. What other lessons do the *Julia Ann* and the *Méduse* hold for how we should approach society as a whole?



Shipwrecks often bring to mind disasters at sea. But even Saskatchewan has seen shipwrecks. In 1908, the *City of Medicine Hat* struck Saskatoon's Traffic Bridge and capsized. One archaeologist has pointed to evidence that the steamship may have been purposely sunk: the boat was a money-losing operation, and before the captain attempted to take the boat under the bridge all the passengers disembarked and most of the valuables were removed.

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