

Training Goes to the Movies

By Mark S. Carley

Trainers in all industries are turning to the timeless art of storytelling to drive home difficult or complex points about leadership, vision, teamwork, and customer service. Good moviemakers are among the best and most entertaining storytellers we have. The next time that you want to make a powerful training statement, consider the movies.

Listed below are my own dirty dozen best movies for training. There's a brief plot summary of each, as well as some suggestions for training activities and discussion. The movies are organized by training topic. You won't always have the time to show the whole feature, but you can use just the relevant scenes.

Change management

The Wizard of Oz: Directed by Victor Fleming. Starring Judy Garland, Ray Bolger, Bert Lahr, and Jack Haley (119 minutes, 1939).

Sudden change in the workplace can make employees feel like Dorothy, whose world is turned upside down when a tornado catapults her to the Land of Oz. Change can mean disorientation, especially in circumstances such as a corporate takeover or merger. Setting goals and using alliances are crucial in getting workers back on their feet and putting them on the right course home.

□ Compare Dorothy's sudden arrival in Oz with the changes your company is going through. Discuss such common consequences as disorientation, loss of friends, and threats to the future.

□ What qualities do Dorothy and her companions exhibit on their trip to see the Wizard that can help participants on their career journeys—courage, friendship, problem solving, cheerfulness?

□ Discuss the importance of having a goal when taking a journey. List the adversities that Dorothy overcomes in order to reach her goal. Brainstorm some obstacles that trainees are likely to encounter in their career journeys. Are their goals strong enough to prevail?

The River Wild: Directed by Curtis Han-

son. Starring Meryl Streep, Kevin Bacon, and David Strathairn (111 minutes, 1994).

Meryl Streep is an expert rafter who takes her family on a whitewater expedition. Strathairn is her milquetoast husband who has to find his manhood and courage in order to save the family from evil Kevin Bacon. Whitewater rafting is a classic metaphor for change, which is my first reason for putting this excellent thriller on the list. The second reason is the way the film examines how people react to adversity and become heroes.

□ Note the movie's opening scene in which Streep rows in a racing shell. Compare that scene with any of the many later when she battles whitewater in her rubber raft. What sort of business situation is analogous to the racing shell? What kind to the rubber raft? What sort of equipment and skills do people need for different situations? Is your company's current circumstance more like the shell or the raft?

□ Discuss the changes that the husband has to go through in order to prevail. What forces him to change? Is he stronger for the change?

□ Ask participants to share experiences that forced them to grow. Was the experience worth it? Would they go through it again?

Team building

The Dirty Dozen: Directed by Robert Aldrich. Starring Lee Marvin, Ernest Borgnine, Charles Bronson, and Jim Brown (145 minutes, 1967).

Lee Marvin is the tough-guy major who recruits 12 convicts for a suicide mission to assassinate high-level Nazis. Joining the team is the only alternative to the death penalty or life in prison. The movie follows the team training and the execution of the mission. Team members are a nearly uncontrollable bunch of misfits and psychopaths, but each brings a crucial skill to the project.

□ List and discuss the steps that Major Reisman (Marvin) takes to mold the men into a team.

□ How does the motivation of the men change from purely extrinsic (hoping to escape punishment) to intrinsic (wanting to

succeed for the sake of the team)? Could the mission have succeeded if the men's loyalty remained entirely to themselves?

□ Do teammates have to like each other in order to succeed? If you know that teammates are never going to like each other, what kind of relationship should they have?

□ Have your team members assess their own and each other's strengths. Then, have them identify ways that each member's strengths can be used to help the team meet its goals.

The Commitments: Directed by Alan Parker. Starring Robert Arkins and Andrew Strong (125 minutes, 1991).

An unemployed Dubliner decides to form an Irish band to play American rhythm-and-blues music. Through an extensive (and hilarious) audition process, he puts together a fabulous band. But hard luck and interpersonal conflict keep the Commitments from achieving its potential. Especially interesting are the rehearsal scenes, which show why teamwork is so vital to success in music. (An added bonus: The cast of real musicians knocks out dynamite versions of such classics as *Midnight Hour*, *Mustang Sally*, and *Take Me to the River*.)

□ If anyone on your team has musical experience—even singing in a church choir—ask him or her to relate how a musical group becomes a team. Have the rest of the group draw parallels with their own situations.

□ Discuss why the Commitments didn't succeed. How important is it to handle personality clashes within a team? How can teams draw out a difficult member's talent without demoralizing the rest of the team?

□ During the film, several characters talk about how important the band is to their lives. Why is it so important? Is your team's mission just work, or is it vitally important to members' lives? If it isn't, how are you going to make your team successful?

The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill but Came Down a Mountain: Directed by Christopher Monger. Starring Hugh Grant, Tara Fitzgerald, and Colm Meaney (99 minutes, 1995).

This is a silly movie with a serious message for teams. Hugh Grant plays an English surveyor who comes to a small Welsh town to measure the height of the local “mountain” for mapmaking purposes. The height turns out to be just under 1,000 feet, making the mountain a hill. This outrages the townspeople, who take great pride in their mountain. Two local leaders, the tavern keeper and church pastor, mount a hilarious effort to haul enough earth to the top of the hill to reach the magic 1,000-foot mark.

- The tavern keeper and the pastor usually hate each other. Discuss the value of a common goal in bringing people together. Do leaders have to like each other in order to work together?
- The goal of the townspeople probably seems ridiculous, yet it motivates them to extraordinary effort. What lessons does that teach your team? Brainstorm some ridiculous goals that might get the team going.
- What role does group pride play in making teams successful? What can your group do to establish and maintain that kind of pride?

Management and leadership

Crimson Tide: Directed by Tony Scott. Starring Denzel Washington and Gene Hackman (115 minutes, 1995).

Hackman commands a nuclear submarine, Washington is the first officer. The sub is ordered to fire a nuclear missile at Russia, but its communication system fails before the order can be confirmed. Should they fire? Hackman says yes; Washington says no.

Leadership style and crisis management are the issues here. Hackman is a hierarchical authoritarian who pushes harder and screams louder as urgency increases. Washington has a different style, and therein lies the film’s training value.

- Before showing the film, discuss whether it’s possible to manage a crisis without being authoritarian or dictatorial. Consider the same question again after viewing.
- What role does moral authority play in leadership? How does it help Washington take command from Hackman?
- List the management mistakes made by Hackman, and review the things Washington does right. Brainstorm similar examples in the business world and in

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your company.

- Consider each basic kind of power—coercive, reward, position, knowledge, referent, and information—and note examples of when and how effectively each is used.

Gettysburg: Directed by Robert F. Maxwell. Starring Tom Berenger, Martin Sheen, and Jeff Daniels (238 minutes, 1993).

Be forewarned: *Gettysburg* is four hours long, so you may want to select just a few key scenes for your training exercise. You’ll enjoy the editing process, though, as the film is totally engrossing. It tells the story of the Civil War’s greatest battle through the eyes of Union and Confederate commanders. Outstanding examples of leadership abound.

- Follow Colonel Chamberlain (Daniels). Take notes on his leadership style and discuss. What sources of power (see the list in the previous item) does he use effectively?
- Take a close look at the scene in which Chamberlain takes charge of a group of deserters. How would you expect a military officer to handle such men? How does Chamberlain handle them? Which approach is more productive?
- Analyze General Lee’s (Sheen) confrontation with Jeb Stuart over the latter’s poor performance. What lessons does it contain for managers who have to administer discipline or give performance reviews?
- Lee lost the battle. In the process, thousands of his men were slaughtered. Yet, he retained the complete loyalty and love of his troops. Do great leaders always win? If they don’t, what are the qualities that make them great?

Creativity and problem solving

Apollo 13: Directed by Ron Howard.

Starring Tom Hanks, Bill Paxton, Kevin Bacon, and Ed Harris (140 minutes, 1995).

In this true story of the ill-fated moon mission, an accident strands three astronauts in space. Their only hope of survival lies in a long-shot scheme to use the moon’s gravitational pull to throw their spacecraft back on a course for Earth. Meanwhile, the crew’s oxygen is running out and the folks at Mission Control have to find a new supply before the astronauts suffocate.

This is a great movie to show a team facing long odds. The situation appears impossible, yet no one—on the ground or in space—expects anything but success.

- Identify the leadership qualities needed to guide a team toward an urgent deadline, especially when the consequences of failure are dire.
- Develop a creativity exercise based on the scene in which the engineers must create a breathing system made up of components already in the spacecraft. Give your team an engineering project using Legos, Tinkertoys, or other building materials. Look for creativity and teamwork in the results, not engineering quality.
- One big reason the Apollo 13 team succeeded was the urgency of its goal. Work with your team to find a sense of mission for your project that inspires a high level of dedication and energy.

Fly Away Home: Directed by Carroll Ballard. Starring Jeff Daniels and Anna Paquin (105 minutes, 1996).

The mission may seem trivial compared with *Apollo 13*, but *Fly Away Home* provides a delightful example of creative thinking and a focus on goals. Daniels is a reclusive inventor. Paquin is his malcontented preteen daughter. A bizarre effort to teach a flock of geese to fly south for the winter unites them.

If you have a work team that needs to think more creatively, the various attempts to solve the goose problem can help to kick-start that process.

- Identify the constraints we put on our thinking. First, list the obstacles the movie characters face in their attempts to help the geese. Next, look at your own project and do the same thing.
- What do you think drives Daniels’s character? Why would a talented engineer choose the lonely and oft-ridiculed life of an inventor, rather than the con-

vention of the corporate world? What spirit moves him? Brainstorm ways you can cultivate that spirit inside a large organization.

□ What makes a goal important? To most of us, the prospect of helping a flock of geese migrate wouldn't generate much excitement, yet Daniels and Paquin are passionate in their need to succeed. Why? Have you and your teammates ever felt that passion?

The Flight of the Phoenix: Directed by Robert Aldrich. Starring Jimmy Stewart, Richard Attenborough, Peter Finch, and Ernest Borgnine (143 minutes, 1966).

As in *Apollo 13*, the *Phoenix* characters face a near-impossible task and certain death if it fails. An airplane has crashed in the Sahara. There's no hope of being rescued. The only chance is to reconstruct the plane based on the plans of an aircraft designer who happens to be on board. Imagine the reaction of his fellow passengers when they find out the engineer designs toy airplanes.

□ In addition to coordinating a doomed effort, the leaders of the survivors (Stewart and Attenborough) must contend with the group's enormous interpersonal problems, ranging from cynicism to dementia. How do they pull everyone through? How do they keep people from giving up? □ Now look at your own team. How do you deal with teammates who give up because they think a task is impossible? What about people who always try to blame someone else when things go wrong? What about cynics who say, "Yes, but . . ." to every new idea?

□ What can the movie teach your team about accomplishing goals with limited resources? If you don't have a lot of time and money, how can you get the job done anyway?

Diversity

Lone Star: Directed by John Sayles. Starring Chris Cooper, Kris Kristofferson, Elizabeth Peña, and Matthew McConaughey (130 minutes, 1996).

A 20-year-old murder mystery surfaces in a small Texas border town where white, black, Hispanic, and Native American cultures clash. The white sheriff (Cooper) tries to solve the crime, but finds that racial attitudes complicate his investigation and his life.

□ Examine the scene at the school board

meeting. White and Hispanic board members have very different versions of the Mexican War and Texas history. How can cultural upbringing have such a strong impact on how we look at seemingly objective facts? Is one interpretation of history superior to another? Can you think of other examples of how race or upbringing affects perception? Think of items in the news or your own experience.

□ Look at the problems the sheriff and the schoolteacher (Peña) have in pursuing their romance. Why do people of many cultures object to interracial couples? Do those who object have a valid point? How do cultural priorities square with individual rights?

Do the Right Thing: Directed by Spike Lee. Starring Danny Aiello, Spike Lee, John Turturro, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee (120 minutes, 1989).

The film opens as a day in the life of a struggling Brooklyn neighborhood. Action focuses around an Italian-owned pizza parlor with an almost all-black clientele. A series of small racial comments and incidents escalates, with tragic consequences. Roger Ebert says, "*Do the Right Thing* comes closer to reflecting the current state of race relations in America than any other movie of our time."

□ The irony of the title lies in the fact that so many characters do or say the wrong thing, which leads to tragedy. How many missed opportunities to better race relations can you find?

□ How has the restaurant owner (Aiello) reacted to the changes in his neighborhood? Give specific examples, and discuss how he might have acted differently. How should business owners react when their customer base becomes more diverse? What threats and opportunities does a diverse customer base present?

□ Ask your audience to view the movie from the perspective of a race other than their own. Have participants adopt the

viewpoint of one of the movie's characters. For example, Aiello is an Italian trying to run a business in a neighborhood where he is in the minority. Other characters are black residents of the neighborhood just trying to get by. Another participant could play the Korean character, that of an immigrant trying to build a base for his family in a culture that confuses and scares him. Someone else could take the role of the white suburbanite, someone who's probably never even been to Bedford-Stuyvesant.

One caution about using movies in your training sessions: The consensus of attorneys and industry representatives is that showing a rented or purchased movie to an in-house training audience probably does not violate the movie's licensing agreement, and would certainly not bring down the wrath of Hollywood producers. However, if you plan to advertise the showing of the movie or charge admission to your training session, you must make appropriate arrangements with the film's producer or distributor.

Enjoy the show.

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to find a sense of mission
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