



Business Community Resilience while Fighting the Flu in the Fur Trade, 1797

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Summary

Managers coping with Covid-19 should perhaps think less about *what to do*, as much as *what to draw* from remnant but quite resilient interpersonal relationships within their local enterprise communities. While large firms can impart purpose, identity and productivity to employees within normally-functioning “imagined” communities, whether in broad strategies of CSR, a sense of corporate heritage and history, and even non-face-to-face communications in textual media, in periods of crisis, they can draw from localized communities, often largely of their own making, where customary, ritualized and inter-personal relationships remain significantly resilient.¹

The resiliency of local community is evident in the 1797 flu crisis in the Canadian Fur Trade

The influenza circulating between the fur trade posts in present-day Manitoba in 1797 finally caught up with James Sutherland in late April while he served as master of the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) post at Brandon House. Influenza was a common scourge in the fur trade in the late 18th century. Canoe brigades using more extensive and rapid routes from the Great Lakes quite commonly carried influenza with them far inland.² In Manitoba, for instance, flu wrecked havoc in the trade in Fall 1795. Of eleven employees working at Carlton House, near Brandon House, the flu left five employees unable to work for weeks. Two died.³

Sutherland himself did not survive this flu. But his death suggests lessons for business managers coping today with Covid-19. As a manager (commonly called “factors” in the HBC), Sutherland oversaw his company’s business and encouraged trade with Indigenous people. Employee morale was critical to the success of his trade. Especially in winter months when trade ironically increased, travel was nevertheless limited, manual work decreased, isolation set in, and food supply became uncertain. Labouring servants living in close quarters often lost themselves in broody lassitude or lashed out at one another in frustration. In such circumstances, the customary and even ritualized practices that built a sense of community in the trade became key in importance. Servants, for instance, practiced “baptism” of novice servants and newly promoted masters, masters consented to servants “naming” lakes or raising “lobsticks” in their honour.⁴ Through rituals, convivial celebrations around bonus rum allocations, Saint Day observances and dances, masters motivated servants to take up their



grueling and dangerous work in the trade by striking relationships with them in mutual obligations and privileges.⁵ In winter, masters reinforced community. They assigned makework projects, closely maintain employees' schedules around waking and sleeping hours, and managed food supply. They also curbed alcohol consumption. But in the case of the HBC, a Londonbased and explicitly hierarchical business organization, effective management also maintained clear social distinctions between masters and their "officers," and they with labouring servants. Rigid social and quasi-class distinctions divided work according to an individual's contracted job description, whether as a "trader," "clerk," "interpreter," "hunter," "carpenter," "iron forge," or "labourer." Each job category paid an individual a different salary, bonuses and sometimes living conditions and diet. Social distinctions categorizing work, in turn, created the makings of a resilient community that functioned surprisingly well in the rough environs of the fur trade. A manager might undermine community cohesion through lax leadership or by indulging in heavy drinking and fisticuffs with their own men. Another might demoralize servants by allowing posts to run to ruin, or by failing to keep them fed and clothed sufficiently.⁶

In his long career as a fur trader, Sutherland built communities at the various posts he managed. Although undoubtedly resented for doing so at times, he insisted on men hearing his sermons on Sunday mornings.⁷ He maintained firm leadership, reprimanding and disciplining servants working poorly, but doing so fairly and transparently. He criticized masters he saw beating their men, abusing them verbally, or withholding food from them in punishment for poor performance.⁸ Sutherland confirmed his leadership, as well, by maintaining his living quarters separate from servants, either in his master's "loft" above their bunkhouse, or beyond a door hung on iron hinges (metal of any kind being precious in fur trade territories). Whatever their implied hierarchical ordering, these practices recreated home British society at the time and provided employees a familiar social context in which they could live and work.

We are fortunate to have a detailed description of Sutherland's ultimately losing battle against the flu in 1797, one revealing the resiliency of the community he created around him at Brandon House.⁹ After suffering a couple days, Sutherland sent his personal assistant, James Moore, for medicine at a trading post farther up the Assiniboine River. The trader kept a medicine cabinet, a portable wooden box with cubbies filled with a variety of chemical apothecaries and herbals.¹⁰ Moore returned home with two "papers" of vomits, two of purges to induce diarrhea, and a little dried rhubarb.

It was undoubtedly the vomits that killed Sutherland. An informal inquest by the HBC's London Committee later ascertained that the papers were likely Dr. James Powders, manufactured in England.¹¹ Mostly arsenic, physicians typically prescribed the powder in miniscule doses to an individual fighting the flu. The powder induced fever, which helped



purge infection. But Sutherland was a sick man impatient to get better. He seems to have indifferently mixed the powders in water and drank them. He vomited, but, as the post's diary recorded, he still felt "very sick but is walking about." Thomas Miller, the post's second in command, then took up the pen to continue the post diary. With Sutherland sick, it was his duty to keep up the entries, these to help in the post's accounting by year-end. Luckily for present-day readers, Miller sensed the grave turn in his master's health and he carefully recorded what happened next.¹²

After vomiting, Sutherland paced for four hours. Sutherland feeling worse, not better, then drank warm water. Then he boiled a little tea, likely from willow bark extract, which he used on other occasions to induce vomiting.¹³ He tried bathing his feet in warm water. By 10 p.m., he was inconsolable and so physically exhausted that Miller helped him up the narrow stair ladder to the bed in the master's loft. Given the seriousness of his master's condition, Miller even recorded the verbal exchanges between Moore and Sutherland: "I will stay up with you all night Sir," the servant said. "No, go to bed," Sutherland replied, "and set the people to work in the morning till I get up and if I want anything I will ring the bell for you."¹⁴

Late in the evening, it rang. Moore found his way upstairs to Sutherland who told him to light a candle. "I wish that I had never taken that vomit," is all he said.¹⁵ Moore returned downstairs to wake Miller. "The master is very weak," Moore said, and they both went up to see him. "James Moore and I caught him by the hand and said, 'Dear Sir you are very weak.'" Sutherland was unable to speak. "He looked steadfastly and his lips moved but said nothing," Miller recorded.¹⁶ Miller told Moore to call all hands up. A fur post's community usually rallied around a sick member. A master typically assigned men as pairs to spend evenings with individuals becoming seriously ill.¹⁷ These bedside vigils drew a community close together around their most vulnerable and weak members.

With his death now a certainty, Sutherland's community fully rallied around him. The men rolling out of their bunks to arrange themselves at the bottom of the ladder to bid their master adieu.

These would have been the carpenters, the boat builders, and the clerks, finally the servants, and then Indigenous employee hunters. Rank was respected in this formal exercise. James Moore, as the post's senior officer, was the first to go up. He took with him his son. Reaching the deathbed, they found Miller, Sutherland's servant, who was performing his duty by propping James up in his bedding to meet, in turn, his employees. But the Moores came to the bed just as Sutherland died. "He never breathed after," Miller recorded, "In him the Hon'ble Company lost an able and worthy officer whom I great regret."¹⁸

The men returned to their bunks. Miller, as Sutherland's servant, however, sat with the body all night with the candle burning. The next morning, a servant and the post's carpenter built a coffin. The post journal did not record other work performed in the day of



mourning, except that Moore formally inventoried James' possessions, these to be returned to his brother in Scotland. Then the next day, on May 1, the post's community reassembled and, joined by the Montreal fur traders from upriver, Sutherland was buried in the "the English manner." In the fur trade, this usually entailed a processional march to graveside, where the community divided itself between higher ranks serving as pallbearers and lower serving as mourners. After the burial, the men built a fence around the grave.¹⁹

James Sutherlands' death from the flu is relevant to present-day managers. The community Sutherland had helped created at Brandon House proved resilient in crisis. Ritual observances, rank distinctions, and clearly set roles, responsibilities and privileges joining members of this business enterprise together continued to function during Sutherland's own illness and death. It is remarkable that among his few recorded final words were those giving his servant instruction to call men to their assigned duties the next day. Even in a period of crisis, this manager came to rely on, and draw from, the ritual and social organization he helped reinforce in a community at Brandon House. Managers coping with the Covid-19 crisis might think less about *what to do* as they might about *what they can draw from*, even virtually, in the local interpersonal communities they have created around a business enterprise. These very direct, perhaps ritualized, but explicitly circumscribed relationships prove reliant in times of crisis.

Endnotes

- ¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006 [1983]); Sarah Buckler, "Imagined Communities Incorporated: Corporate Social Responsibility and Value Creation in a Globalised World," *Corporate Social Responsibility* (Springer: CSR, Sustainability, Ethics & Governance, 2017), 3-22; Michael Heller and Michael Rowlinson, "Imagined Corporate Communities: Historical Sources and Discourses," *British Journal of Management* (2019), 1-17; J.A. van Kleef and N.J. Roome, "Developing Capabilities and Competence for Sustainable Business Management as Innovation: A Research Agenda," *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 15:1 (2007), 38-51; Andrew Smith and Daniel Simeone, "Learning to Use the Past: The Development of a Rhetorical History Strategy by the London Headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company," *Management and Organizational History* 12:4 (2017), 345-347; William M. Foster, Diego M. Coraiolab, Roy Suddaby, Jochem Kroezend and David Chandlere, "The strategic use of historical narratives: a theoretical framework," *Business History* 59:8 (2007), 1176-1200. Michel Anteby and Virág Molnár, "Collective Memory Meets Organizational Identity: Remembering to Forget in a Firm's Rhetorical History," *Academy of Management Journal*, 55:3 (2012), 515-540. On corporate heritage brandings, see John M T Balmer and Mario Burghausen, "Explicating corporate heritage, corporate heritage brands and organisational heritage," *Journal of Brand Management* suppl. Special Issue: Corporate Heritage, 22:5 (June /July 2015), 364-384.
- ² See Paul Hackett, *A Very Remarkable Sickness: Epidemics in the Petit Nord, 1670 to 1846* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002); James Dashuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvations, and the Loss of Indigenous Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2014).



- ³ See Carlton House (Assiniboine) Journal by Charles Isham, 1795-96. B.28/a/1 Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg [Hereafter HBCA]; Death by flu, dropsy and other ailments was common. See the case of George Hudson, at Cumberland House, 19 April, 1790 Cumberland House Journal, 1789-90 by Malcolm Ross, B.49/a/121, HBCA.
- ⁴ Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006);
- ⁵ See Scott P. Stephen, *Masters and Servants: The Hudson's Bay Company and its North American Workforce, 1688-1786* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2019); Michael Payne, *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory: Everyday Life in Hudson's Bay Company Service, York Factory, 1788-1870* (Ottawa: National Historical Parks and Sites, Canadian Parks Service, 1989).
- ⁶ See Donald McKay's drunken and abusive behaviour recorded in the Brandon House Journal, 1794, before he his transfer from that duty, B.22/a/1, HBCA; Another Sutherland, John, never gained higher managerial postings because of his heavy drinking and poor leadership. His competitors mockingly called him "Sugar Royale" in reference to a rum punch drink of the time. Archibald McLeod journal, in *Five Fur Traders*, 133-34; Robert Goodwin downrated the performance of John Richards, who in bouts of alcoholism allowed his post to fall to ruin and his men go without proper footgear and warm clothing. See descriptions of Richard's alcoholism, fighting with men and the description of his post by Robert Goodwin, particularly 22 October 1794, Brandon House Journals, B.22/a/2.
- ⁷ He withheld Sunday's rum allocation to those who did not attend his sermon on 4 February 1794, James Sutherland's Portage de L'Isle Journal, B.166/a/1, HBCA.
- ⁸ As he described of one of his competitors at Portage de L'Isle in 1793, See 22 October 1793, Portage de L'Isle Journal, B.166/a/1.
- ⁹ 28 April to 1 May 1797, Brandon House Journals, B.22/a/4, HBCA.
- ¹⁰ It was likely the medicine cabinet owned by John Macdonell, of the Northwest Company. These medicines and the common treatment of bleeding are described in *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest: Being the narrative of Peter Pond and the diaries of John Macdonell, Archibald N. McLeod, Hugh Faries, and Thomas Connor*, ed. Charles M Gates (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1933), 130, 177, 206.
- ¹¹ The Committee's inquiry is reported in its letter to Alexander Sutherland, James's brother, 19 March 1798. A.5/4 London Correspondence Book Outwards 1796-1808, fol. 27, HBCA
- ¹² 28 April 1797, Brandon House Journals, B.22/a/4, HBCA.
- ¹³ Sutherland and his second in command stayed with their guide suffering from stomach pain and used this purgative to good effect, as recorded, June 15, 1795, Gloucester House Journal, 1795, B.78/a/15, HBCA.
- ¹⁴ 29 April 1797, Brandon House Journals, B.22/a/4, HBCA.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ See, for instance, the men assigned to do vigils at the bedsides of George Whitty, 26 November, and Robert Wilson, 1 December, and Thomas Bunn on 4 December 1795, Carlton House (Assiniboine) Journal, 1795-96, B.28/a/1 HBCA.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ 1 May 1797, Brandon House Journals, B.22/a/4, HBCA.



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