

the telos institute

Peak Experiences

Beyond the Canyon's Edge

| April 04, 2017

James Van Doren

We sat down for a few minutes with Betsy Ross to talk about her insights and experiences with the telos institute's leadership venture or tlV.

The tlV is designed for business owners, c-suite executives, and other distinguished performers looking to hone and refine themselves as leaders, instruments of change, or innovators within their organizations, as well as their wider spheres of influence. These multi-day guided experiences integrate the landscape of awe-inspiring locations with high-level executive coaching. It's a development methodology by which leaders find the time, space and guidance to begin a thoughtful discovery and evolution. As a transformative exploration, they're designed to spark innovative thinking and create sustainable, personal breakthroughs in



Betsy Ross, contemplating the expanse beyond the canyon's edge.

addressing leadership, strategy and change.

We wanted to ask Betsy what the experience was like for her, personally.

James: *Betsy, thank you so much for sitting down with me today. I really appreciate your time.*

Betsy: I'm happy to be here.

James: *What I want to do first is just talk about what the experience on the telos leadership venture, or tlV, was for you.*

Betsy: So what aspect? When you say what it was?



The views from within the heart of the Grand Canyon National Park are incredible. The landscape is varied and immense.

James: *Just how the experience was for you when you were in the midst of it?*

Betsy: In the midst of it.... Oh my gosh. It's powerful, moving, on so many levels. The nature scape is just incredible. I've been to the edge of the [Grand] Canyon before, but I've never been down in it. So just to be engulfed with something so vast. And the training is so different from what you're used to – just the chance to take part in it. It was a great experience.

James: *I know the landscape exploration is a big shift for many people. How did that blend with the focus on leadership and the focus on inner exploration?*

Betsy: So for me, part of the inner exploration was an opportunity for me to test my limits. I think there's a lot of metaphor as you think about one of these ventures, but purely from a physical standpoint, this was the most I've ever planned and prepared for something. It was a chance for me to stretch myself.

I think, we can take that metaphor into leadership. Just the sheer physical nature of it I think is an accomplishment, but then you can turn it over and think about "So how can I take what I'm experiencing physically, emotionally – how can I take that into these new [leadership] roles that I'm challenging myself to? How can I take all this back home and apply it into the leadership realm?"

There's this, um, juxtaposition between the purely physical and then having to translate it into leadership



Participants in the tlv breaking for camp.

and being present. By the way, successful leadership and strategy are somewhat about managing the unknown, so pushing and stretching beyond what we already know certainly applies to both of these.

James: *It sounds like there was a lot of self-discovery and understanding on the leadership venture?*

Betsy: Yes.

James: *I know a lot of leadership programs, leadership journeys, there's a lot of focus on the self, but in the tlv you guys have to stick together as a group. There's a lot of group interaction going on and activities. How was that different for you or how did that play out for you as part of your individual leadership development?*

Betsy: What I think was amazing about our venture, in particular, was how quickly the group bonded. There's something very special about the team dynamic as you go along. And there's plenty of time for both team and solitary learning, which I also found interesting. But when it comes to the group interactions, I think what stands out the most, that we can take into leadership is – well, for me it was about the peripheral.

That peripheral vision you have to have, and what's going on around me. How are people responding and who's doing okay? Maybe who needs a little support? And the flip side of that, there were times when I

"I think what every person comes away with is, they can do far more than what they think they can."



needed support and knowing how to ask for that was something you learn. Because certainly in this environment, you're pushed. I felt compelled to ask for help when I needed it, where maybe I wouldn't have done that so much on my own without a larger group/team experience. So huge learnings there on not trying to just tough it out, but to learn to ask when you need it. And not only the asking, but as part of the team being able to offer support. It's kind of an interesting 360 there as I think about the dynamics.

James: *That makes a lot of sense. The risks from hiking are real and immediate, so it makes sense that you learn how to ask for help. Even recognizing the barriers to that asking.*

Betsy: Exactly. It's one of the things that makes it so powerful. Learning that we can do more, if we let ourselves.

James: *Speaking of the realities of the environment that you go into on the leadership venture; We live so much in kind of a different world. We're very disconnected from the environment and very disconnected from nature.*

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A global organizational consulting firm with expertise in leadership, strategy, and change. telos engages senior leaders seeking a committed, collaborative partner to drive strategic value. telos delivers transformative experiences that accelerate growth by equipping leaders to embrace people as their competitive advantage, challenge what is possible, and mobilize discretionary effort.

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Betsy: Hugely disconnected.

James: *What does this mean for you as a business leader? As someone who lives in the city, works in the city?*

Betsy: I'm not sure I'm going to answer the question the way you asked it, but let me just share just a little about my background.

I have a nature practice that I've incorporated into my business. So, I'm very connected to that and that was my desire. What I learned being in corporate America was just how starved we are for fresh air and nature. And how supportive nature is once you think about work-life balance and wellness – which just... there's huge benefits of being in nature.

I've already connected to that aspect – the passive

benefits of just being in nature. The tlV represents the opposite end of the spectrum.

What I mean is, my nature practice is more mindful, slowing things down. The tlV is more of a challenge. Push the limits. I was very curious to experience that entire spectrum and see what it would mean for me. And now my desire is to be able to do that work as well with clients, and to guide, to lead tlVs. I know that wasn't quite the question you asked.

James: *That's OK. It leads into my next question. What do you think the tlV, telos leadership venture, experience would mean for somebody who was the CEO or an executive level person, for a high-stakes, high-speed organization – let's say a Fortune 500 company, like a GE, an Amazon, a*



Betsy Ross, consultant & leadership development professional.

Wal-Mart? What would somebody like that get from the experience you think?

Betsy: What I noticed in the venture was each person gets what they need. I don't mean to sound so philosophical about it, but it's true.

For some people, it's about wanting to better take care of themselves. For others it's about how they connect with people in a more authentic way. Others it's about pushing the limits, it's about pulling more out of you. So, I think that there's a lot of different things all playing out. How do you stretch? How do you do more? And that – the venture's going to bring that out differently in everyone. Each person is going to interpret the experience and go back and apply it to their unique challenges and circumstance.

James: *So it sounds like the tlv experience is a very personal experience for each individual. Even though you guys are going through the same outer landscape, it's very much colored by your internal landscape. What was one of the biggest surprises for you?*

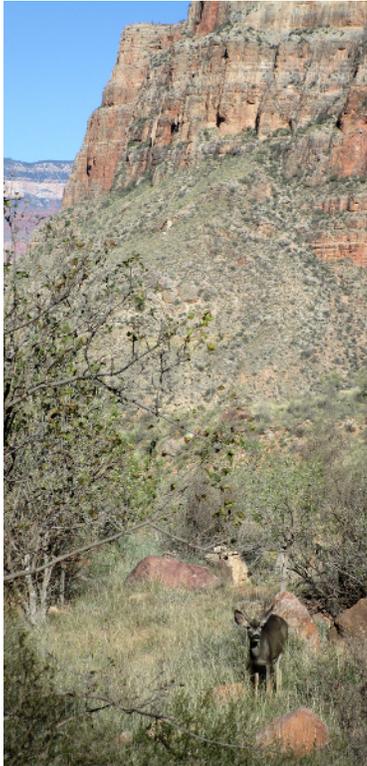
Betsy: That I could do it. [laughs] Earlier you asked about what's a key learning. I think what every person comes away with is, they can do far more than what they think they can. Whether that's on a physical level, whether that's at leadership level. The venture calls upon each of us to do more and to grow, to expand, to transform.

James: *How has it affected you since you left, since the tlv? Have you noticed any changes in how you approach things? Your mindset? Do you go back to the experience at all?*

Betsy: So physically I think about what's that next level. How can it be even more fit, more healthy? Mentally, it's about how can I be more cognizant of my environment. We spent time in these beautiful spaces. And whether it's a national park or whether it's somewhere else, we're in these environments that are being threatened. So, I've come back with even more of a love of nature and questioning how we can protect those environments. [pauses] I'm sorry. I think I digressed.



A rest & water break is also an opportunity for a thoughtful leadership discussion.



An unexpected visitor joins the group for a part of the hike.

What was the question again?

James: *That's okay. How has the telos leadership venture colored your experiences, your mindset now that it's over?*

Betsy: There are a couple of levels. There's a simplicity that you tap into on these trips, where you're taking just what you need and then leave with just what you need. For me I brought back "What do I need? How much is enough?" There's a simplifying of everything. It's very, very tangible. You know, I even packed differently for my European vacation over Christmas because of the venture. In my work I start thinking about what's multi-purpose and streamlining. Less is more. So that's something I've taken away and applied in many different contexts.

James: *Interesting.*

Betsy: The other thing is that, certainly, I've found I can do more. So I think about how can I play a bigger role – have a more profound impact? I think whether you're a CEO, or any level of a leader – an amateur, it's asking more of yourself and leading the way when you're doing that – leading by example. So, when you're asking more of people around you, you are doing it yourself as well because you're better in tune with your capabilities. I think you just embody that leadership at a deeper level once you go through an experience like this.

James: *One of the things that you mentioned that was striking to me, is that you said that the leadership venture, the journey to the Grand Canyon, and the focus on coaching, and all the experience really kind of, not necessarily increased your empathy, but made you more aware of it - more focused on what others needed.*

Betsy: So, if you have good empathy I think you grow it and expand it to an even greater degree. If it's something that you're struggling to develop as a leader, you're certainly now going to be able to tap into that and help support the team as well. It is a skill you learn.

James: *What about the leadership venture do think really either helped you get*

more in touch with your empathy, build it, or express it?

Betsy: I think on one level there's a vulnerability when you're out there. You're in this new environment, deep in the canyon and you realize that you're one small part of the team. So, there's an aspect of self-care and being cognizant about you and your needs, but also thinking about the group. Because the success of the group is also the success of each individual.

I think for me personally there were... I struggled in the past with a fear of heights and I had to rely on other people to help me through that at times. So then there's a reciprocity, at least for me, that comes out of that. Having others support me, in turn I want to give back and support where I can in various ways.

There's a human dimension that I think evolves when there's no distractions, when you're in nature doing something challenging and you're living simply. Through it all the group is spending time together, sitting in the evenings having a meal together. I think then naturally the human spirit gets tapped into. And it's something you feel over the course of the venture. I would say that the bond happens for people on the trip is pretty... I was impressed. It's a bond, connection that will last for probably our lifetime based on that experience.

James: *So would you say this would be something especially powerful for a team from one organization?*

Betsy: Yes, absolutely. I think it's powerful for a team. I think that also you can have a group where a variety of leaders come together from different organizations and experience this. I would say that both ways are right. There's no wrong way to experience a venture, so equally powerful in either combination.

James: *What was your experience with some of the leadership exercises and leadership discussions that happened on the trip?*

Betsy: Yeah, great question. I think the discussions are very thought provoking. I think that they helped to enhance team dynamic. One thing that comes to mind was there is this poem about geese. So the geese fly in formation, and how they

"It was an intimidating decision. But I had so much faith in what I heard people had taken away from this."



On a telos leadership venture conversations, idea sharing, & mentoring occur among & with coaches & other executives.

move in and out of different roles in the formation - they support each other so they all get to the destination. That was something that builds on empathy and the team dynamic. Then there's also activities that cause us to look inward as well, our personal goal setting and leadership challenges. It was a nice balance between team discussions and the individual exploration.

James: *So what would you say to somebody who felt like maybe this is was a bunch of fluff and a vacation? And wasn't really going to be impactful.*

Betsy: [laughing] It's so not fluff. It's so not fluff.

You know it's um.... I think that the process that goes on around the tlV is important. We haven't really talked much about that, but the coaching that happens pre- and post-, as well as the experience on the trails nicely connects the dots. It encourages people to anchor whatever learnings they have from this experience and then tie it back to their organizational leadership. And certainly the sharing by the team along the way, that generates additional thoughts.

I want to say like - you're taking some of

the brainstorming that can happen around the boardroom table and you're doing it out in the wild. There's a lot of application that comes from those discussions. Not only from what each person comes up with on their own, but the sharing back and forth.

There are leadership guides who support us through the venture. So there is development during the actual outdoor venture, as well as during the coaching that happens before and after. They're [the leadership guides] very talented about pushing us and challenging us to think bigger, to ask "How are we going to integrate that? What does that mean for you as a leader?" There's a beautiful infrastructure that supports those dynamics.

I think that any leader can be assured that this is a significantly intentional experience - personally and professionally I would say that.

James: *Well, speaking of - we do often separate our personal life from our professional life. But it's important to remember we're a whole person and that those things don't really separate all*



The colors have built as layers of soil over time. The river waters have carved out these immense structures to reveal the beauty beneath.

that easily.

Betsy: And this is a beautiful experience, because I think it demonstrates just that.

We've become so disconnected from our roots, which is outdoors and nature – and that sometimes means we're disconnected from our own emotions which are influencing us. And so a venture gives us that opportunity to return to our roots and to consider what we've been distracted from, maybe what's more important.

I think we have a tendency to live for what's next, and this helps ground us in the moment.

James: *You're right. I certainly do that myself. I'm probably too often future focused. [laughs] Maybe I need a tlv? Well, I have 2 more questions for you. One*

- you mentioned, and you're were right, we didn't really talk about the leadership process that is baked into the telos leadership venture. Some of that is coaching beforehand, the activities during the venture, and the coaching afterwards. Can you share your experience with that process? What was meaningful? What worked?

Betsy: You absolutely should do a venture!

I'm going to say on the front end, I felt very supported. This was such a physical challenge for me, getting support on how to prepare physically as well as mentally and emotionally - I think it's one of the keys to the success of this program. I felt supported and I felt like I had the resources to help prepare. I also felt some of the coaching conversations helped to set the stage for me on what I was hoping to explore while on the venture.

Throughout the venture the exercises, the conversations, helped me to think bigger, think outside the box. I was able to make the connections with what I was experiencing and what I was seeing. And then post venture there is a very thoughtful debriefing process. Like "What are you noticing? What are you maybe doing differently since you've gotten back? How are you showing up as a leader?"

That's more impactful than most traditional programs I've been involved with. The development and coaching process really dovetails seamlessly with the venture.



The Grand Canyon is home to more life & diversity than many expect.

James: *This is my final question for you. I know that you recently made a conscious choice to bring nature more into your personal practice, so you wouldn't necessarily need selling on the telos leadership venture now. But if you were to talk to yourself from 10 years earlier....*

Betsy: [laughing] I never envisioned doing this. Never.

James: *What would you say to sell*

"For a team that is intentional about taking their company, and their team, all the people of their organization to new heights – this is a priceless experience."

yourself on the tv - yourself from 10 years earlier, who wasn't necessarily open to this?

Betsy: So I always enjoyed nature – but honestly, I can't say I ever envisioned pitching my own tent and sleeping outside. From a physical standpoint I think it would have been very hard for me to envision doing this, because of some of my back injuries.

There's a certain amount of trust as part of this. Trusting that the people who tell you how amazing it is – that it is that amazing. For me I think that was a key component. And that's how I would have connected to myself ten years ago, through planning, through the discipline, and how I prepared.

I did do it for example. [laughing] I did do it and I'm going to do it again. So, yeah, trust. Telling myself from 10 years ago that I, we, always can do far more than we ever envisioned – and to

just trust and take that first step. Do it. Does that answer your question?

James: *Yes, absolutely.*

Betsy: I really could not have imagined doing this 10 years ago. You're talking to somebody who can't... who in the past couldn't get to the edge of a sidewalk at the Grand Canyon.

I'll also say this - there's something amazing about every person I've come into contact with over at telos. And the inspiration they bring... that is one of the reasons I finally decided to do this. It was an intimidating decision. But I had so much faith in what I heard people had taken away from this. And I wanted to prove to myself that I could overcome a fear of heights, that I could be more self-sufficient out in nature, that I could show up authentically and bond with a team that I didn't even know. That in and of itself is amazing.



Hiking into the setting sun on a trail isn't the end of the journey.

I don't know how I could have prepared myself for that 10 years ago. I wouldn't have believed it if I told myself this is what I would be doing it, and this is how I would be doing it, and this is how I would be going to work. And not only that but that I would enjoy the whole process? [laughing] It's so far removed from what I was doing 10 years ago.

I think it's trust and faith and challenging yourself. I think being willing to be challenged is probably partly how I prepared.

I believe in life-long learning, and tomorrow being better than I am today, and always learning something new. I think that was a piece of this for me. I think the other part is - sometimes if you want to have a game-changing experience, if you want to see things and do things differently, you have to step outside your comfort zone and you have to be willing to do that. And I did. And I'm stronger for it.

James: *I'm going to actually ask you one last question.*

Betsy: [laughing] No more, no more. You're not allowed.

James: [laughs] *I promise, this is the last one. Would you say this is something that would be worth \$50K, \$60K, \$70 or \$80K depending on how many people....*

Betsy: For a whole team? Absolutely.

James: *...for a whole team, a whole executive team?*

Betsy: Absolutely. I don't want to be cliché, but it truly is transformation. I also believe in the power of intention. For any team that is truly intentional about pulling together and working in a different way – a better way. For a team that is intentional about taking their company, and their team, all the people of their organization to new heights – this is a priceless experience. By setting those types of clear intentions and going on a venture and trusting and being fully engaged in the process to see what happens – absolutely. If your organization would want to reinvent themselves and expand their capabilities, reach a whole new level - this is how they would do it.

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