

Be the Buffalo

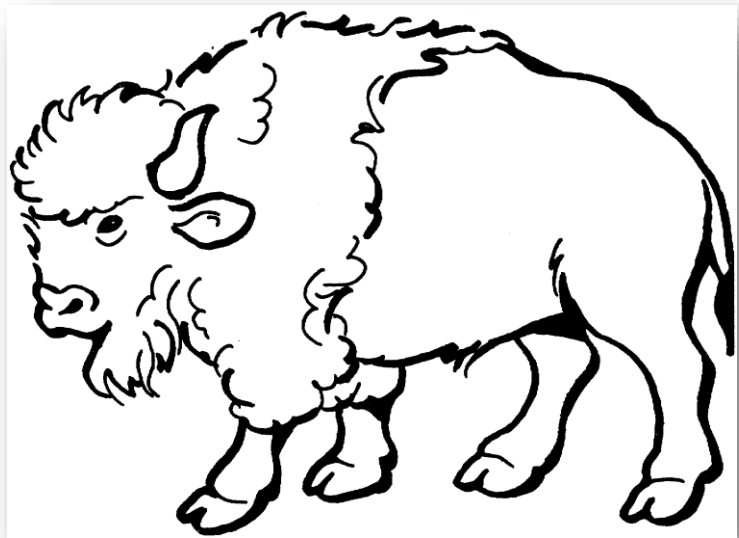
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Whenever I'm confronted with a tough challenge, I do not prolong the torment, I become the buffalo. – Wilma Mankiller (past chief, Cherokee Nation)

A storm is coming. Across the Rockies to the West, large rainclouds rumble across the plains, full of sound and fury, with torrential downpours, gusts of wind, lightning, and booming thunder. Native Americans have long noticed that when faced with the oncoming storms, cows always march away from the storm. Cows tend to be slow, and eventually the rain finds them. They move together, marching East, with the cows extending their time under the deluge as the storm clouds pass overhead. The buffalo are different. They seem to be drawn to the storm, and will turn to face it, meeting it head on. Because of this unique behavior, they get through the storm sooner, and more importantly, spend less time within it. The cows are moving, are doing something, just not the right something. The buffalo are doing the correct action. The Cherokee will say, "Be the buffalo."



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Recently I was attending a leadership conference where the moderator was discussing the need to directly face our complex problems. Too often, as leaders and even as followers, we tend to run away from this hard work, what we call Lean Thinking, the standardized work that requires continuous improvement. Our masonic language calls it square work, moving from the rough to the smooth ashlar. Sometimes we talk about getting the small wins, picking the low hanging fruit, and yes, these simple successes can be, and often are important, but not if we avoid the greater challenges at hand. In leadership, we need to work on the difficult issues now to enjoy the fruits of success sooner, rather than procrastinate. This takes vision, a deep understanding of the problem itself, the discipline to begin and then to see things through.

The 2007 book *The Influencer: The Power to Change Anything* spends time reviewing ways to solve these large and complex problems, building on the work of Jonathan Haidt, using the elephant as a metaphor. We have all heard the story of eating the elephant one bite at a time when faced with what seems like insurmountable difficulties, but there is another metaphor about an elephant that we should consider. This elephant represents our emotions, with the small rider on top representing our intellect. We try to tell the elephant where to go, what to do, and when to do it, but the emotional elephant goes where those emotions take him. Too often we "spook" the elephant by showing him the entirety of a complex problem. He runs away. From *The Influencer* we understand that by breaking down these complex problems into smaller, more manageable parts, we don't spook the elephant and we are able to tackle the problem one small piece at a time. We are doing the good and square work, finding solutions to difficult problems, not simply fixing those simple things that are easy.

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This is how it is with our fraternity. Our lodges are living organisms, not a factory making widgets, and because of the human element, has a complexity to them that requires different thinking for solutions. Putting out brush fires as they appear simply kicks the proverbial can down the curb, but doesn't work on the root cause analysis of the problems of declining membership, apathy, just-in-time or boring meetings, and the like. No, this requires answers that also have many moving parts.

We need to tackle these problems now, before we reach that tipping point of no return for our fraternity. If we ignore the storm, just like the cows, it will eventually overtake us. If you want to better understand the problems we face in America with the decline of social capital, read Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone*. It is about the impact of generational change and loss of socialization on organizational membership, regardless of whether it is the PTA, service clubs, professional societies, or our beloved fraternity. We can't afford to avoid the difficult work; it will just prolong the inevitable consequences. By dealing with the issues now, our results are more efficient and efficacious. If we wish to maintain that social capital we so long for within our fraternity, let us turn directly towards the storm. Let us tackle our issues head on. Let us become the buffalo.