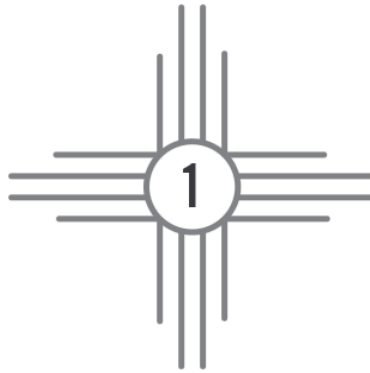




Pain

How has failure shaped you? As a department head, I tried to implement a new leadership approach on *Will Rogers* and failed.

1989: The Irish Sea

Eight thousand tons of steel moved silently, hidden in the depths of the Irish Sea. In the control room of the USS *Will Rogers* (SSBN-659), the officer of the deck (OOD) ordered the ship toward the deeper, wider expanses of the North Atlantic. Glancing at the missile control panel, he could see the status of the sixteen Poseidon missiles on board, each capable of carrying fourteen multiple nuclear-armed reentry vehicles. These missiles were the sole reason for the existence of the *Will Rogers*, a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine—SSBN for short—the kind of submarine the crew affectionately called a “boomer.” One thing above all else mattered for a boomer: to be at sea and in a condition that would enable it to execute a strike if so ordered. SSBNs were a vital component of America’s strategic deterrence.

The control room was the nerve center of the ship. So important were its sixteen missiles, invulnerable to attack once under way and submerged, that

boomers had two crews—a Blue Crew and a Gold Crew—to maximize the time the submarine could spend at sea on strategic deterrent patrol. The crews lived near New London, Connecticut, and *Will Rogers* was operated out of a forward base at Holy Loch, Scotland. Every three months the crews would swap, with a three-day turnover period. After assuming the boat from the other crew, the new crew would spend four weeks doing the necessary corrective and preventive maintenance before going to sea. In order for the United States to have a credible strategic deterrent, the missiles needed to be ready to go. If *Will Rogers* couldn't make it on time another submarine would have to remain at sea longer.

Forty-one of these ballistic missile submarines were built between 1958 and 1965 in response to the Soviet threat, an impressive industrial accomplishment. *Will Rogers* was the last of the forty-one SSBNs and had operated nearly continuously since its commissioning. Those original submarines were being replaced by the newer and more capable *Ohio* class; however, *Will Rogers* still had important operational tasking to perform. Nevertheless, after thirty-three years, it was a tired ship. Worse, during the patrol before I reported aboard, *Will Rogers* had collided with a trawler and failed an important certification.

• • •

I checked the chart in the control room. We were on track to start the deep dive in about half an hour. I walked aft, past the rows of missile tubes and the reactor compartment to the engine room. With my flashlight, I started doing a last-minute walkabout. All our repairs had been properly certified as completed but it wouldn't hurt to do one more visual check.

As engineer officer for the Blue Crew, I was responsible for inspecting the nuclear reactor and important auxiliary equipment and supervising the sixty men who maintained and operated it. There was a constant tension between doing things right and meeting deadlines; every member of the crew felt it. The job was grueling and I wasn't particularly happy with how things were going.

The officer I relieved was very involved in details. He was always reviewing technical documents and directing maintenance and other operations. I was determined to change that—by giving the men more control

of their work, more decision-making authority, and fewer lists of tasks. In doing so, I hoped to bring the passion I'd experienced on *Sunfish* to *Will Rogers*. In this, I was going against the tide.

Just prior to going aboard, I'd had the chance to ride another SSBN for several days. It was undergoing an underway war-fighting inspection, and the crew were tasked with different missions that required significant internal coordination. I followed the captain around to see what he did. He was everywhere: dashing to the engine room, then back to control; running to sonar and from there to the torpedo room. I was exhausted before twenty-four hours were over. I'm not sure he ever slept during the three days I was observing.

That ship did well on its inspection, and the inspection team specifically cited the involvement of the captain. I had a sense of unease because I knew that wasn't how I wanted to run a submarine. Even if it were, I knew I could not physically do what he did.

Even though the Navy encouraged this kind of top-down leadership, I pressed forward with my *Sunfish*-inspired plan to give control to the department rather than orders. For example, rather than giving specific lists of tasks to the division officers and chiefs of the *Will Rogers*, I gave broad guidance and told them to prepare the task lists and present the lists to me. Rather than telling everyone what we needed to do, I would ask questions about how they thought we should approach a problem. Rather than being the central hub coordinating maintenance between two divisions, I told the division chiefs to talk to each other directly.

Things did not go well. During the maintenance period, we made several errors that required us to redo work. We fell behind schedule. We also had several jobs that didn't start on time because the mid-level management had not assembled all the parts and permissions, or established the propulsion plant conditions necessary to do the work. I overheard people wishing for the old engineer back, who would just "tell them what to do." Indeed, it would have been much faster just to tell people what to do, and I frequently found myself barking out a list of orders just to get the work done. I wasn't happy with myself, but no one else seemed to mind much. I seemed to be the only one who wanted a more democratic and empowered workplace, and I wondered if I was on the right track.

It was touch and go, but as the maintenance period came to an end, my efforts to empower others seemed to be working. There was a budding sense of optimism; we'd make it on time.

In a moment, I realized we wouldn't.

I dropped down the ladder into the lower level of the engine room. I was scanning the various pieces of equipment with my flashlight when I was stopped cold by what I saw. The nuts holding the bolts for the end bell of a large seawater heat exchanger had been improperly installed. The nuts weren't sufficiently grabbing the threads on the bolt. They were close, but I was sure they didn't meet the technical specification. Someone had taken a shortcut. This cooler was subjected to full submergence pressure. Even a small leak would cause seawater to spray into the ship with tremendous force. Failure would be catastrophic.

My heart sank. The deep dive should be starting shortly. I needed to cancel that immediately. Not only would we need to reassemble this cooler; we would need to inspect all the other coolers to make sure the mistake hadn't been repeated. Most important of all, we would need to figure out how this had happened.

I called the OOD and told him we'd need to postpone the deep dive. Then I started the long walk forward to tell the captain. Walking past the sixteen tubes in the missile compartment, I felt quite alone. The reputation of the ship and my department would suffer. My efforts at empowering my team had failed. This should never have happened. As expected, the captain had a fit. Of course, that didn't help fix the problem.

After this, things got worse. I had wanted to give my team more authority and control, but my heart wasn't in it anymore. I would give decision-making control to my people, but they'd make bad decisions. If I was going to get yelled at, I at least wanted it to be my fault. I went back to leading in the way I'd been taught. I personally briefed every event. I approved all decisions myself. I set up systems where reports came to me all day and all night. I never slept well because messengers were waking me so I could make decisions. I was exhausted and miserable; the men in the department weren't happy either, but they stoically went about their jobs. I prevented any more major problems, but everything hinged on me. Numerous times I found errors. Far from being proud of catching these mistakes, I lamented my

indispensability and worried what would happen when I was tired, asleep, or wrong.

I assessed my chances of being selected for executive officer, my next career milestone, as low. None of the other department heads on the *Will Rogers* were selected (screened) for executive officer. None of the department heads on the Gold Crew screened either. Neither executive officer screened for captain. The captain wasn't promoted. The *Will Rogers* was a cemetery for careers. I made plans to do something else with my life. I took a job doing START and INF treaty inspections in the former Soviet Union with the On-Site Inspection Agency instead of going to a submarine staff job.

I returned from an inspection in Volgograd to find a message in my inbox. I had screened for executive officer, the next step after my tour as the engineering department head—I would be going back to sea on a submarine. I should have been ecstatic. Executive officer was one step below captain. Instead, I was strangely ambivalent. I would have to grapple with the tension between how I aspired to be as a leader and how I actually was.

Thinking Anew

While assigned to the On-Site Inspection Agency I had to contemplate what had happened on the *Will Rogers*. I started reading everything I could about leadership, management, psychology, communication, motivation, and human behavior. I thought deeply about what motivated me and how I wanted to be treated.

I remembered the release of energy, passion, and creativity I had experienced running my own watch team on the *Sunfish*. I was motivated to avoid any reoccurrence of the pain, frustration, and emptiness of my three years on the *Will Rogers*, both being directed and directing others.

At the end of that study, I was troubled by three contradictions.

First, though I liked the idea of empowerment, I didn't understand why empowerment was needed. It seemed to me that humans are born in a state of action and natural empowerment. After all, it wasn't likely that a species that was naturally passive could have taken over the planet. Empowerment programs appeared to be a reaction to the fact that we had actively

disempowered people. Additionally, it seemed inherently contradictory to have an empowerment program whereby I would empower my subordinates and my boss would empower me. I felt my power came from within, and attempts to empower me felt like manipulation.

Second, the way I was told to manage others was not the way I wanted to be managed. I felt I was at my best when given specific goals but broad latitude in how to accomplish them. I didn't respond well to executing a bunch of tasks. In fact, being treated that way irritated me and caused me to shut my brain down. That was intellectually wasteful and unfulfilling.

Third, I was disturbed by the close coupling of the technical competence of the leader with the performance of the organization. Ships with a "good" commanding officer (CO) did well, as had the SSBN I rode. Ships that didn't have a good CO didn't do well. But a good ship could become a bad ship overnight when a new CO came aboard. And there was a further twist: every so often a mishap occurred that caused people to shake their heads and lament, "It happened on such a good ship." It seems the captain had made a mistake, and the crew, lemming-like, just followed him. I concluded that competence could not rest solely with the leader. It had to run throughout the entire organization.

Essentially, what I had been trying to achieve on *Will Rogers* was to run an empowerment program within a leader-follower structure. The leadership structure, which was strongly reinforced by the behavior and expectations of the captain, was one of "Do what you are told." Hence, my efforts amounted to little more than "Do what you are told, but . . ." It just didn't work.

What I was trying to do was an extension of the way things worked on *Sunfish*. On that ship, I was empowered, but the sense of leadership stopped with me. Those in my watch team were followers in the traditional model. What made it so liberating was that for those six hours, I didn't feel like a follower. That's what I had wanted to pass on to the officers and crew of the *Will Rogers* engineering department.

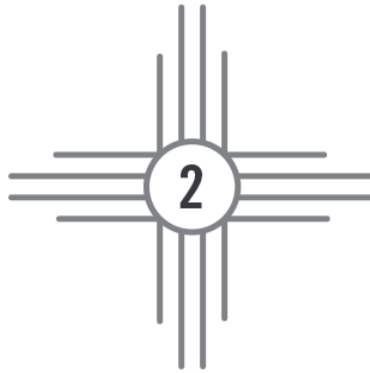
• • •

One of the things that limits our learning is our belief that we already know something. My experience on the *Will Rogers* convinced me there was something fundamentally wrong with our approach. Simply exhorting people

to be proactive, take ownership, be involved, and all the other aspects of an empowerment program just scratched the surface. It was only after serving on the *Will Rogers* that I opened myself up to new ideas about leadership. I began to seriously question the image of the sea captain as “master and commander.” I began to wonder whether everything I’d been taught about leadership was wrong.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Why do we need empowerment?
- Do you need someone else to empower you?
- How reliant is your organization on the decision making of one person, or a small group of people?
- What kind of leadership model does your business or organization use?
- When you think of movie images that depict leadership, who/what comes to mind?
- What assumptions are embedded in those images?
- How do these images influence how you think about yourself as a leader?
- To what extent do these images limit your growth as a leader?



Business as Usual

Are you and your people working to optimize the organization for their tenure, or forever? To promote long-term success, I had to ignore the short-term reward systems.

December 1998: Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

The USS *Olympia* (SSN-717) was heading out the main Pearl Harbor channel *without me*. I hadn't expected that.

I'd been training for twelve months to take command of this specific submarine, and my change of command was in less than four weeks. It was a dream assignment. *Olympia* was a frontline SSN (a nuclear-powered attack submarine)—exactly what I'd hoped for. While *Will Rogers's* mission was to hide in the vastness of the ocean, attack boats were the hunters and would take the fight to the enemy. I had studied the equipment configuration and piping diagrams, the exact reactor plant, the schedule, the weapons, and every problem report the ship had issued in the previous three years. I learned the career status of each officer and read his biography. I reviewed every inspection report: tactical inspections, reactor inspections, safety inspections,

food service inspections. For a year, I'd been doing nothing but think about the sailors on *Olympia* and my responsibility to lead them for the next three years. In the way of the nuclear Navy, I had gained an intimate technical knowledge of the ship. I had loved the prospective commanding officer (PCO) training I had just completed. As a student, I was responsible only for myself for an entire year! In addition to the specifics of *Olympia*, we learned tactics and leadership. I attended a weeklong leadership school in Newport, Rhode Island, and my wife Jane had been able to join me. The entire training course culminated with an intense two-week period at sea driving submarines hard and shooting torpedoes.

The officers leading PCO training were hand-selected from among proven captains; Captain Mark Kenny, who had commanded the *Los Angeles*-class submarine USS *Birmingham* (SSN-698), led my group. Mark inspired us to great learning as well as introspection. Every day we learned about our submarines, and ourselves.

During one torpedo approach, I devised an elaborate ruse that would flush out the opposing submarine and make it a sitting duck for our attack. I predicted to the officers in the control room—in this case, other PCOs—what would happen. The situation developed exactly as I'd foreseen, and we were able to get a hit on a quiet and tenacious enemy. In the middle of the attack, however, I'd had to reach over and do the job of one of the other PCOs because he had gotten confused.

I thought I was brilliant, but Captain Kenny took me aside and upbraided me. It didn't matter how smart my plan was if the team couldn't execute it! It was a lesson that would serve me well.

Olympia was doing well. Its retention numbers were good and its inspection scores were above average. Operationally, it had a reputation on the waterfront for getting it done—that is, fulfilling the missions assigned to it. I wondered what kind of a leadership approach I'd want to apply aboard *Olympia*.

I was keen to get aboard this workhorse of the fleet and finish the turnover process. During the month I was to spend on board before taking command, the ship would be in port for a maintenance period except for this two-day evaluation of the ship's ability to operate the reactor plant. Accordingly, I arranged to ride with the inspection team to meet the *Olympia* at the entrance to Pearl Harbor.

This would not only be my only opportunity to see the ship and crew operate at sea before taking command, it would also be tremendously useful for me to watch the ship go through the inspection. I would be without the emotional attachment of being part of the crew, but I would be responsible for carrying out any corrective action after I took over.

As *Olympia* appeared in the channel and approached the turning basin, the radios crackled on the small boat. The coxswain reported the passengers he expected to transfer to “Oly.” And then word came back from the *Olympia*: only the inspection team would come aboard, *not* the PCO. I wasn’t allowed on board. I “must have misunderstood” the plan. I watched as the submarine turned around and the small boat came alongside, put the brow across, and transferred the inspection team to Oly. I could see the captain on the bridge but we never made eye contact. Then the brow was raised and Oly returned to sea. The small boat carried me back to the inner harbor and dropped me off.

I was miffed that the captain didn’t want me aboard. He was depriving me of seeing the boat operate and watching the inspection. In less than a month, I was going to be totally accountable for the performance of this submarine but wouldn’t be able to see it under way.

Yet, at one level, who could blame him? I would take up another bunk and inconvenience a crew member. Even though this two-day underway period at sea would be greatly useful in sustaining *Olympia*’s quality performance after he departed, he apparently had no interest in helping facilitate that. Could I fault him? In the Navy system, captains are graded on how well their ships perform up to the day they depart; not a day longer. After that it becomes someone else’s problem.

I thought about that. On every submarine and ship, and in every squadron and battalion, hundreds of captains were making thousands of decisions to optimize the performance of their commands for their tour and their tour alone. If they did anything for the long run it was because of an enlightened sense of duty, not because there was anything in the system that rewarded them for it. We didn’t associate an officer’s leadership effectiveness with how well his unit performed after he left. We didn’t associate an officer’s leadership effectiveness with how often his people got promoted two, three, or four years hence. We didn’t even track that kind of information. All that mattered was performance in the moment.

Nothing to See Here, Move Along

I did get aboard *Olympia*—three days later, when it was tied to the pier. As expected, it had done well on its inspection.

My turnover on *Olympia* was straightforward: a review of the records, material inspections, and interviews with the officers and crew. As I walked about the ship, I noted that the crew seemed alert and confident. Almost *too* confident, actually. Because I had a detailed knowledge of the ship, the systems, and the trouble reports, I was able to pinpoint technical issues I wanted to explore. I asked lots of questions about why we did things certain ways. The crew's answers were concise and certain. I soon realized there wasn't any impetus for change. Oly was operating in a top-down, business-as-usual structure, and everyone liked it that way.

I thought about how I would lead the ship when I took over. I shelved my ideas for a radical management change because there would be too much internal resistance. The crew, doing well, wouldn't see the need. I was resigned to executing incremental changes on the standard hierarchical structure.

• • •

It is precisely the success of the top-down, leader-follower structure that makes it so appealing. As long as you are measuring performance over just the short run, it can be effective. Officers are rewarded for being indispensable, for being missed after they depart. When the performance of a unit goes down after an officer leaves, it is taken as a sign that he was a good leader, not that he was ineffective in training his people properly.

Another factor that makes this leadership approach appealing is the induced numbness. It absolves subordinates of the hard work of thinking, making decisions, and being responsible and accountable. You are just a cog, an executor of the decisions of others. "Hey, I was only doing what I was told." People get comfortable with this.

There's a cost to the people, though, which only becomes evident over time. People who are treated as followers treat others as followers when it's their turn to lead. A vast untapped human potential is lost as a result of

treating people as followers. Only in the long run—three to ten years later—does it become obvious, but by that time people have moved on to new jobs.

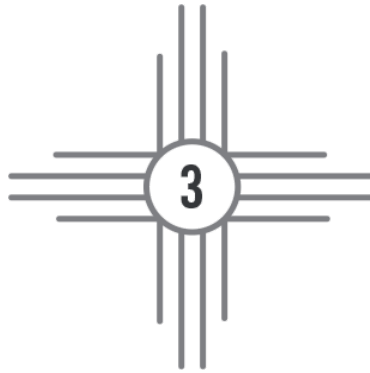
With *Olympia* sitting pierside I sped through my program reviews, inspections, and interviews. Already a technical expert on the ship, I got bored with the turnover and decided to take a week's vacation with my wife. There was a venerable cruise ship, the SS *Independence*, that cruised around the Hawaiian Islands, and we decided to spend the last week before the change of command on a cruise. The first four days were pretty relaxing, observing the beauty of the islands. I was comfortable with how Oly was operating, and the leadership was going to be right up my alley—the same kind that had gotten me through *Will Rogers*.

On the fifth morning, while our cruise ship was passing the lava flowing into the ocean from Kilauea, I received a phone call. In those days it was unusual to receive a call from shore and I assumed it was an internal call. I was startled to hear a crackly voice on the other end inform me that my change of command was canceled. I would be taking over the *Santa Fe* instead, just after New Year's.

I was panicked. The foundation of my leadership approach, my technical competence, was for the wrong submarine.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- In your organization, are people rewarded for what happens after they transfer?
- Are they rewarded for the success of their people?
- Do people want to be “missed” after they leave?
- When an organization does worse immediately after the departure of a leader, what does this say about that person's leadership? How does the organization view this situation?
- How does the perspective of time horizon affect our leadership actions?
- What can we do to incentivize long-term thinking?



Change of Course

What's your level of commitment? I discovered that the hardest thing about my planned turnaround project was my own fortitude.

December 1998: Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

The first thing I did when we returned from our cruise was to visit my new boss and former PCO instructor, Commodore Mark Kenny. Instead of heading down to the submarine piers to continue my turnover on *Olympia*, I veered into the building that had housed the Pacific Fleet commander's office during the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor. Now the Navy's three Pearl Harbor squadron commanders have their offices in that building. I was literally taking a new turn. The *Olympia* was in Squadron Three and *Santa Fe* was in Squadron Seven. My mentor from PCO training, Commodore Mark Kenny, had just taken over Squadron Seven so he was going to be my new boss. Mark had argued forcefully for me to be assigned the job of turning *Santa Fe* around. He had credibility because he'd be living with his recommendation. It was the reason I got the job.

Later Mark told me that one of the reasons he argued for me was that I'd evinced a particular enthusiasm for learning throughout the entire PCO course. He sensed that a keen curiosity would be vital for the successful about-face of *Santa Fe* and its crew, a fact I would later deeply appreciate in ways I didn't then imagine.

When I got the news that I would be taking command of *Santa Fe*, it was a shock. I didn't know much about *Santa Fe* other than it was stationed in Pearl Harbor and scheduled to deploy in six months. In contrast to the *Olympia*, *Santa Fe* was the ship we all joked about during the PCO training pipeline. A damning photograph of *Santa Fe*'s inattentive crewmen had been released on the Internet the previous year. It earned the captain a scolding and was used as a training example of how not to be. *Santa Fe* was the ship that had trouble getting under way on time. And *Santa Fe* had the worst retention in the submarine force: in 1998, for example, it reenlisted only three crew members.

Mark discussed my new job. "You need to get *Santa Fe* and your crew ready for deployment in six months. It's a dream deployment from an operational perspective, with the *Constellation* Battle Group, but it's also going to be demanding. One of the things we're going to try and set up is a torpedo exercise in the shallow Arabian Gulf, to demonstrate our combat effectiveness."

What Mark said next didn't present a pretty sight. "I'm not going to minimize the task in front of you. The ship isn't doing well. It looks from here like there's a leadership vacuum. This is a unique situation. In all my time on the waterfront, I can't remember such a particular confluence of events.

"Look, here's the deal. If you need to change out some people, let me know, but I'm not interested in a lot of turnover. I don't think that will help the crew. I think a better focus would be on working with what you've got. With only six months to deployment you don't have a lot of time to find replacements."

I was thinking that too. In the end, I fired no one.

This was important because it sent the message to each crew member that he wasn't screwed up, the leadership was. My challenge would be to use the same people and support team and by changing the way they interacted and behaved, dramatically increase the combat effectiveness of *Santa Fe*.

As the captain, I would be assisted by an executive officer (XO), the second in command, who was qualified to take command in case I became incapacitated. There would be the four department heads: weapons, engineering, navigation/operations, and supply. Each department head except the supply officer (Suppo) would be trained in nuclear power and could aspire to command his own submarine someday. The odds were, however, that only one of the three officers would. The jury was out on these men. Mark explained that the XO seemed to be closely identified with the outgoing captain, and two of the department heads were too new to assess.

“Look, you’ve got one hundred percent from me and my squadron staff,” Mark continued, “to help you get the ship ready. We aren’t going to walk down there and tell you what you need, but whatever you think you need, we’ll support.”

We also talked about the junior officers. As a group, they were ignored, untrained, and not staying in the Navy. Because this was their first tour, these men were probably the most neglected group on board. All they’d known about submarining and how to be an officer, other than academically, was based on *Santa Fe*. They were a mix: about half had graduated from the Naval Academy, and about half came out of NROTC.

We talked about *Santa Fe* chiefs. Unempowered, uninspired. The twelve chiefs are the senior enlisted men. They are middle management. At our submarine schools, the instructors tell us that officers make sure we do the right things and chiefs make sure we do things right. Their technical expertise and leadership would be key, as would my ability to tap their expertise.

Just as underway time on patrol was the reason the nation built SSBNs, deployments were the reason the nation built SSNs. Deployments were a period of operating for six months away from home port.

During that time, we’d be mostly submerged, operating in areas where our potential adversaries might operate. We’d surface and make port calls to resupply and conduct minor repairs, but overall, we’d need to travel thirty thousand miles on our own. Submarines were most useful forward, in hostile waters, and not sitting back under the protection of the carrier battle group or other allied forces. Deployments required the ship and crew to be at peak maintenance, training, manning, and supply conditions.

The commodore explained that there weren’t going to be any breaks in the schedule to accommodate the abrupt change in captain. The Navy and

nation needed *Santa Fe* to be a “full-up round”—that is, a fully capable submarine. Mark would have the final say on whether my submarine was ready to deploy. His parting words of encouragement: “I have great confidence in your ability to do this. And just one piece of advice, you might want to get a good flashlight.”

We shook hands and I headed down to the boat. How were we—how was *I*—going to do this? I wasn’t sure it was a possible task. I felt overwhelmed and didn’t know where to start. Preparing for deployment was daunting enough, let alone with a demoralized crew. Was I willing to risk implementing a new leadership approach as well?

• • •

Upon reflection, Commodore Kenny was providing great leadership. He presented me with a specific goal—have *Santa Fe* ready for deployment in every way—but did not tell me how to do it. The other thing he was telling me was that the people and resources available to the ship would be the same as they were before and the same as they were to any other submarine. Consequently, the only thing we could change was how we acted and interacted. This would be my focus.

Then I began to reconsider the situation. Since Mark wasn’t going to micromanage me, maybe *this* was a chance to do something different. Maybe this was the chance to set the crew free from the top-down, “do what you’re told” approach to leadership. Maybe this was the opportunity of a lifetime. Of course, I would be solely responsible, and if *Santa Fe* wasn’t ready, it would be my fault and likely my job.

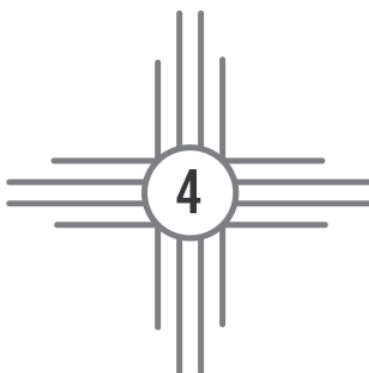
I resolved to give it a try. I left his office and headed down to the pier where *Santa Fe* was berthed.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What are you willing to personally risk? (Sometimes taking a step for the better requires caring/not caring. Caring deeply about the people and mission, but not

caring about the bureaucratic consequences to your personal career.)

- What must leaders overcome mentally and emotionally to give up control yet retain full responsibility?
- What's the hardest thing you experience in letting go of micromanaging, top-down leadership, or the cult of personality?
- How can you get your project teams interacting differently but still use the same resources?
- What can you as a subordinate do to get your boss to let you try a new way of handling a project?
- Do you give employees specific goals as well as the freedom to meet them in any way they choose?



Frustration

Are you curious? I thought I was being curious during my previous tours; turns out I was only “questioning.”

**December 15, 1998: On Board USS *Santa Fe*,
Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (twenty-five days to
change of command)**

I approached *Santa Fe* with a mix of curiosity and anxiety.

In the U.S. Navy, we name the submarine classes after the hull number of the first ship in the class. The *Los Angeles*-class submarines are 688s, and the class was split into two “flights”: first flight and second flight. The *Olympia* is the thirtieth ship of the first flight 688s; *Santa Fe* is a second-flight 688. Other than the overall hull shape, the ships are significantly different. The first-flight 688s have sail planes, four torpedo tubes, and a reactor plant that needs to be refueled once during the life of the ship. The second-flight 688s have bow planes, twelve vertical-launch Tomahawk land-attack missile (TLAM) tubes

in addition to the four torpedo tubes, and a redesigned reactor plant that has enough fuel to last the entire life of the ship.

I descended the narrow hatch. As I passed through the mess decks, I heard the topside watch announcing “Commander, United States Navy, arriving” per protocol. I made my way forward through the narrow passageways. I pleasantly greeted each crew member I passed. The passageways in a submarine are about two feet wide; you can’t pass someone without acknowledging their presence. It’s just like passing someone in the aisle of an airplane. Mostly I got mumbles or grunts and a lot of men looking down at their shoes. They seemed embarrassed. They avoided eye contact. They avoided conversing. These guys were beaten. They had been told over and over they were the worst ship in the submarine force and they believed it. Just across the water from *Olympia*, it was worlds away.

I stopped by the captain’s stateroom to let him know I was on board. I was his relief, and in a couple weeks this would be my responsibility; but right now it was his. That was a bit awkward since he would be leaving command a year early. Eventually I would be assigned the second desk in the XO’s stateroom for my base of operations, but for the moment I didn’t have a place. The change in orders had caught the crew of *Santa Fe* by surprise too. Not having a place to plop down, I walked into the control room and looked around instead. The equipment was shut down but I could see from the panel faces, gauges, and dials that it was different from what I’d seen before. Since I didn’t have a place I started wandering around the ship. After a time I started asking nearby crew members about the various pieces of equipment. For the first time, I was truly curious.

Walking the ship, I would ask the crew questions about their equipment and what they were working on. They were skeptical about these questions initially. That’s because normally I would have been “questioning,” not curious. I would have been asking questions to make sure they knew the equipment. Now I was asking questions to make sure I knew the equipment.

My unfamiliarity with the sub’s technical details was having an interesting side effect: since I couldn’t get involved with the specifics of the gear, I opened up space to focus on the people and their interactions instead, and to rely on the crew more than I normally would have. I decided I’d do physical inspections of the ship and review the records, but only as a guise for understanding the crew. Whereas on *Oly* I had reviewed some records by

myself, I decided that everything I did on *Santa Fe* would be with an officer, a chief, or a crew member.

I started interviewing the chiefs and officers in their spaces. After having them tell me about their people, I asked them a loosely structured set of questions like these:

- What are the things you are hoping I don't change?
- What are the things you secretly hope I do change?
- What are the good things about *Santa Fe* we should build on?
- If you were me what would you do first?
- Why isn't the ship doing better?
- What are your personal goals for your tour here on *Santa Fe*?
- What impediments do you have to doing your job?
- What will be our biggest challenge to getting *Santa Fe* ready for *deployment*?
- What are your biggest frustrations about how *Santa Fe* is currently *run*?
- What is the best thing I can do for you?

Later, I thought about some of the things I had heard. A lot of things were problems with how *Santa Fe* did business.

- "Admin disappears into a black hole."
- "The duty officers delay getting maintenance started."
- "The junior officers are the source of low standards."
- "I was previously qualified for this watch station, transferred ship to ship, and now have to start over with a blank qualification card."
- "I've been waiting for four weeks to get a test so that I can qualify."
- "There's no participation in the wives' club."
- "The radio installation and upgrade we just received left us with less capability than what we had before."

- “I was promised a certain job when I came here, and it hasn’t happened.”
- “I just keep my head down and try to stay out of trouble. When things go badly, I secretly hope someone else will screw up next.”

The conversation I had with Fire Control Technician (FT) Chief David Steele was typical. “I’ve asked to be transferred,” he admitted. Chief Steele had been on board *Santa Fe* for two years and wasn’t having fun. He wasn’t one of the command’s favorites and wasn’t moving up in the performance rankings. A high school dropout, Steele had gone to see the Navy recruiter when he turned eighteen. He performed well enough on the aptitude test to be selected for submarines, so the recruiter convinced him to take the GED and enlist. Now, Steele ran the fire control system (FCS) that sent targeting instructions to every missile and torpedo *Santa Fe* launched.

“I still haven’t even signed my evaluation,” he told me. I resisted the urge to comment on what a disservice this was to him. December already, and evaluations were due on September 15. His file would be incomplete when the promotion board met, reducing his chances to zero. I wondered, if the chiefs’ evaluations are this bad, what about the junior enlisted men?

“And I don’t like how the command is handling evals, anyway,” Chief Steele grumbled.

His “tell it like it is” style may have grated on some, but I appreciated it. He was key to the *Santa Fe*’s combat effectiveness, and his knowledge of the vertical launch missile system (VLS) was especially important for me.

“Look, Chief, I can’t promise I’ll make you an EP, but I can promise that performance rankings are going to be based on your contribution to the ship’s mission, period.” (EP is the highest competitive ranking—it stands for “early promote.”)

On another occasion, the chief responsible for a nuclear division told me, “No one has reviewed my equipment status log [ESL] since I’ve been here.” The ESL is a large database that includes details about everything that’s wrong with each piece of equipment the division owns and therefore forms the basis of the maintenance and operational plans.

I was uneasy not being the technical expert on each and every piece of equipment on board. The impact of this focus on people was that I was going to have to rely on the crew to provide me with the technical details about how

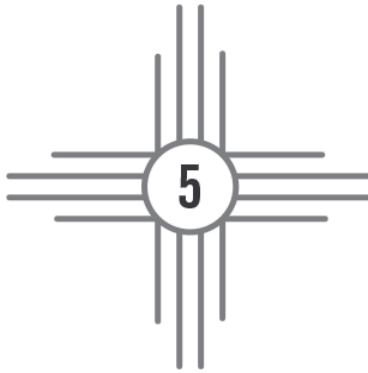
the submarine worked. This went against every grain of my naval leadership and scientific training. But the circumstances demanded a new mode of operation. Doing the same thing as everyone else and hoping for a different outcome didn't make sense.

I am not advocating being ignorant about the equipment. For me, however, it was a necessary step to make me truly curious and reliant upon the crew in a way I wouldn't have been without it. Later in my tour I became a technical expert on all aspects of *Santa Fe*, but the positive patterns had been set and I continued in the same relationship with the crew. If you walk about your organization talking to people, I'd suggest that you be as curious as possible. As with a good dinner table conversationalist, one question should naturally lead to another. The time to be questioning or even critical is after trust has been established.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Are you asking questions to make sure *you* know or to make sure *they* know?

- Do you have to be the smartest person in your organization?
- To what degree does technical competence form the basis for leadership?
- Is that technical competence a personal competence or an organizational competence?
- How do you know what is going on “at the deck plate” in your organization?



Call to Action

When was the last time you walked around your organization to hear about the good, the bad, and the ugly of top-down management? Walking around and listening was my first step in preparing to command *Santa Fe*.

**December 16, 1998: On Board USS *Santa Fe*,
Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (twenty-four days to
change of command)**

According to procedure, I was to spend the next two weeks reviewing everything on the ship, including training records, school records, administrative records, award records, advancement records, records pertaining to the operation and maintenance of the reactor plant, the weapons system, the torpedoes and missiles, schedules, exercises, classified material, and so on. I ignored that. Instead, I spent my time walking around the ship talking to people. I also set up a series of walkabouts during which each chief or officer would walk me around his spaces. In order to do these inspections

properly, I'd ask them to bring me a flashlight. It wasn't supposed to be a test, but the flashlights were pitiful. Broken, dead batteries, dim bulbs—you couldn't see anything. I figured this was what Commodore Kenny was talking about. I got myself a super Maglite that took four D-cell batteries. Its light was as bright as the sun. I carried that flashlight around with me everywhere. Soon, others started carrying flashlights that actually worked as well.

I attended a department head meeting, a routine review of maintenance issues, in the wardroom. The wardroom is a small room in which there's a ten-man table where the officers eat. It also serves as a training room, an operational planning room, a meeting room, and the place where officers watch movies. If necessary, it serves as the surgical operating room as well.

I looked around at the four department heads. These were the key individuals I would go to war with, entrust the lives of the 135 crew members to, and possibly die with. I felt bad for these guys: the attendees wandered in late, and the captain stayed away until everyone was assembled. Then he was invited. The meeting started late. It might seem like a little thing, but on board a nuclear submarine, little things like lack of punctuality are indicative of much, much bigger problems. At this particular meeting, everyone was waiting for someone else.

The meeting started. Lieutenant Dave Adams, the weapons officer (Weps), briefed a problem with the vertical launch system (VLS) in the bow of the sub. There was a long discussion about O-rings, seals, and retests. I probably should have paid attention to the technical issues because this missile system wasn't on the *Olympia* so I hadn't paid attention to it during my training, but instead I observed the people in the room. Dave was earnest and forthright but frustrated and defensive about all the questions he needed to answer. The other department heads and chiefs were bored.

After the meeting I followed Dave to his stateroom.

"Weps, you seemed a bit frustrated."

"Look, Captain, I have a vision of how I want this department to operate," he began. As I listened to him tell me about how he wanted things to be, I became more and more enthusiastic, and impressed. Unfortunately, he was being ignored. As he ticked through the ideas he had for improving his department, I would ask how he had implemented them. Each time the answer was the same: someone up the chain of command hadn't supported the initiative, so nothing happened. The chiefs working for him didn't seem

eager to step up with their own ideas either. He had wanted to conduct training with the officers numerous times on Tomahawk missile strikes, something we would be tested on in January, but the training either had never been scheduled or had been canceled.

In essence, Dave was describing a problem inherent in the leader-follower model, although he didn't use those words. Because of his insights and passion he would become one of *Santa Fe*'s greatest engines for good, embracing the concept of leader-leader and carrying it forward.

I found Dave an incredibly intelligent, driven, and gifted officer. He grew up the younger son of a career Army enlisted man. Likely influenced by his demanding father, Dave acquired a drive I've rarely seen equaled. He also learned to appreciate his men but at the same time demand excellence from them. I felt better about my plan because I was going to have to rely on the technical expertise of Dave and the other department heads if it was going to work.

Dave wasn't the only frustrated officer. Lieutenant Commander Bill Greene, the navigator (Nav) and senior department head, had requested a transfer out of the submarine force. Two of the junior officers had submitted their resignations.

As things on *Santa Fe* deteriorated, the crew adopted a hunker-down mode in which avoiding mistakes became the primary driver for all actions. They focused exclusively on satisfying the minimum requirements. Anything beyond that was ignored.

During one of my walks around, I noted that one junior sailor looked particularly forlorn. When I pressed him on how he was doing, he told me he wasn't sure he was going to get home to the mainland for Christmas because his leave chit wasn't back yet. Turns out he'd submitted it weeks earlier and the holiday break was coming soon. He hadn't bought airline tickets yet since he didn't know if his leave would be approved, and now, this late, the tickets were bound to be expensive, if they were even available.

The Standard Submarine Organization and Regulations Manual (SSORM) states that the XO will sign all enlisted leave chits (and the CO all officer leave chits). Since we enforce the chain of command, that means that a leave chit from a junior sailor must go through his leading first class petty officer, divisional chief, department chief, chief of the boat, division officer, department head, and, finally, the XO. Seven people! The form had only five

lines for signatures, so we were using rulers to half-split some of the lines so everyone could sign.

We had done this sailor wrong.

I rushed about, tracked down his leave chit—it was sitting in someone's inbox—and took care of it. It was the system, not the people, that failed, however.

Once I had acquainted myself with my men, I devoted time to observing some of the ship's routines. One morning I was talking to the engineer (Eng), Lieutenant Commander Rick Panlilio, when the radioman arrived with the message board. In those days, we took all the naval messages that came to the ship each day—there might be thirty or forty—printed them out, and routed them on a clipboard with a routing stamp. The stamp had a spot for each person to initial indicating he had seen the messages. Some messages were general and administrative, announcing courses or changes in requirements for paperwork or updates to manuals. Some messages were material, reporting changes in maintenance procedures or requesting data on a particular valve if made by a particular company. Some messages were operational, providing direction for the ship's schedule, assigning navigational waterspace, and tasking the ship for operations.

Rick flipped through the sheets of paper and was visibly aggravated. "Here, look at this," he said. By protocol the messages are routed first to the captain, then to the XO, and down the chain of command. This way, the captain would be the first to know of any change in the ship's schedule. It is how we controlled the information.

The message board had already been to the captain and XO. Many of the messages had notes on them from one or both: things like "Enter this message change in the publication," or "I want a report back on this by Friday." Rick looked downcast. "See, this message is an urgent change to a publication; you don't think we know that we are supposed to enter the change? I'm getting told to do stuff before I even know I have stuff to do!"

"Why do you think the captain and XO feel they need to write those things?"

"Well, look, I may be wrong, but let's say something doesn't happen—some report does not get sent or a school date changes and we don't catch it—and some inspection team is looking at the records. The captain can say, 'I told him to do it,' and bully for him. He gets good marks for being very

involved, having his fingerprints everywhere. But from my perspective, it's not helpful; it actually hurts. Not only are they telling me to do stuff I already know I have to do, but also frequently I get told exactly how and when to do it. That takes away any decision-making opportunities I might have."

As was the case with the message board, like every other submarine, *Santa Fe* had quarters on the pier a couple times a week. This was a morning formation with the crew standing behind their chiefs and officers in a square. The CO, XO, and chief of the boat (the senior enlisted man, known as the COB) were in the middle and made announcements. On the day I'm describing, we conducted an awards ceremony. It was great to see some sailors getting well-deserved recognition. The awards were for people leaving the ship or for the previous upkeep. Unfortunately, no wives had been invited to attend, and there was no photographer, so we lost the chance to promote these accomplishments in front of a wider audience. There was a last-minute scramble to assemble the citations and medals. We welcomed new crew members and bid aloha to departing ones. The captain seemed unfamiliar with the details about the men: where they had come from, where they were going.

As the formation went on, I wandered around the periphery. Standing in the back, where most of the crew was, I couldn't make out anything the captain said. His words were muted and garbled. I asked one of the crew members if he could hear. No, but it didn't matter, he said. If there was something important, the chief would tell them at divisional quarters, a meeting that followed this meeting. With leader-follower it didn't matter.

• • •

The overwhelming sense on the ship was that we needed to avoid problems: avoid drunken driving citations, avoid liberty incidents, avoid physical fitness failures, avoid tagout errors, avoid rework, and avoid a reactor problem.

Still, there was a spark, a desire to do well despite all these frustrations.

It was clear to me that whereas the *Olympia* crew wasn't as good as they thought they were, the *Santa Fe* crew wasn't as bad as they thought they were. There was a thirst to do better and an eagerness for change.

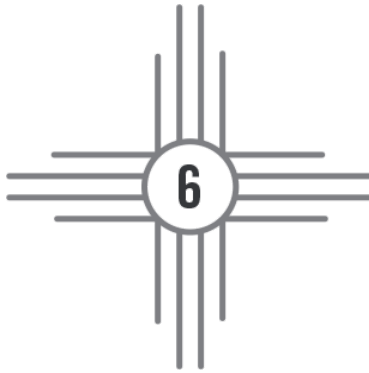
I felt the crew's pain and frustration in a physical way. When I arrived in the morning, my stomach was in knots as I anticipated finding out about

some new way the crew's time was being wasted and their talents ignored. At the same time, I knew that their pain and frustration were providing me with a tremendous call to action. There would be an eagerness to change the way we were doing business that I could tap into. I resolved that we would turn everything on its head. I'd try the initiatives I had tried unsuccessfully on *Will Rogers*.

I went back to Commodore Kenny and told him I could definitely work with this. We would deploy on time.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Is there a call to action in your organization?
- Do people want to change, or are they comfortable with the current level of performance?
- Are things too comfortable?
- Is there a feeling of complacency?
- Do people take action to protect themselves or to make the outcome better? Does leadership in your organization take control or give control?



“Whatever They Tell Me to Do!”

What goes on in your workplace every day that reinforces the notion that the guys at the top are the leaders and everyone else is simply to follow? I was startled to find this was pervasive on *Santa Fe*.

**December 26, 1998: On Board USS *Santa Fe*,
Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (fourteen days to
change of command)**

It was a quiet day over Christmas break. Only a skeleton watch section remained on board, and they were not doing any maintenance. The men were just taking logs and completing daily routines like loading potable water and pumping the sanitary tanks.

I wandered about the ship with my flashlight and made my way to the engine room. En route I passed the maneuvering room, which is the control room for the reactor and the propulsion plant. Formality here is to be stressed

at all times. All personnel must ask permission to enter. It doesn't matter how senior you are; even admirals have to ask to be admitted. To be informal in the maneuvering room is detrimental to the safe operation of the ship, and thus a huge taboo.

I recalled the photo I had seen during PCO training that showed a bunch of shaggy-looking guys. They weren't just informal; they were cracking up. To make matters worse, this picture had gone around the Internet, and you could see in the background some of the dials and instruments for the reactor plant. The point of showing us the photograph during PCO training was to demonstrate how bad things could get without proper enforcement of standards. And, yes, the guys in the photo were crewmen on board *Santa Fe*.

I recognized some of the watch standers from the picture. I wondered if they knew how famous, or infamous, they were. Probably not. I stopped to chat with a first class petty officer on watch in the engine room. First class petty officers are one rank below chief. They are the workhorses of the Navy, doing a tremendous amount of watch standing, hands-on maintenance, as well as training of the junior enlisted men. They are considered to be budding leaders.

"Hi, what do you do on board?" By asking open-ended questions like this, I could better gauge what the crew thought their job was.

"Whatever they tell me to do," he immediately replied with unmistakable cynicism. He knew he was a follower, and not happy with it, but he also was not taking responsibility. He was throwing it back in my face that the command was all screwed up. It was a stunningly insulting thing to say, yet a brilliantly clear description of the problem. I should have been irate. Instead I felt strangely detached—like a scientific observer.

"Whatever they tell me to do." That was the attitude all over the ship. I began to see things in a new light.

Whatever They Tell Me to Do!

Toward the end of one day, I was sitting with the XO in his stateroom. Lieutenant Commander Bill Greene, the navigator, came in and asked the XO if he had anything more for him that day. The XO, who was caught off

guard by this question, said no and Bill headed home. Bill was, like everyone else on board, ready to do whatever he was told.

This was a show for me. I asked the XO if checking out was normal practice. In a proud voice, he told me that he liked the department heads to check out with him so he could go over what they “owed” and make sure they didn’t go home with a significant issue open. But, he admitted, they didn’t always do it.

I subsequently went over this end-of-day checkout event in detail with all the officers. The problem, I explained, was that in this scenario the XO is the one who was being responsible for each department head’s work, not the department head himself. Psychological ownership for accomplishing the work rested with the XO, not the department head. Checking out is fine, I said, but it should go more like this: “XO, I’m shoving off for the day. The charts for next week’s underway are coming along fine, and we’ll be able to show the rough plan to the captain tomorrow. I wasn’t able to see Petty Officer Smith for his qualification interview but will be able to make that up tomorrow.” In this scenario, it is the department head, not the XO, who is responsible for the department head’s job. This is leadership at all levels.

The department heads identified a potential problem with this approach. Who would be responsible and accountable for the work? If you, the captain, allow us to make decisions about the work, aren’t you risking your professional reputation and career on how well we do? Isn’t that the reason these ideas are so hard to implement?

They had a point. I pondered that. Would I be willing to be vulnerable to the effects of their decisions? On a submarine, a warship, there were lives at stake after all, not just our careers. I would retain accountability for *Santa Fe*’s operational performance but release control of the actual decisions to the department heads. It felt uncomfortable, but we were in such a bind that I didn’t see any other way. Besides, *Santa Fe* was already at the bottom—how much worse could the ship do?

By contrast, “whatever they tell me to do” pointed to the reality that the fundamental structure of leader-follower was the problem on board ship. Everyone below the captain and the department heads had their brain shut off. What did that give us? We had 135 men on board and only 5 of them fully engaged their capacity to observe, analyze, and problem-solve. An image from my hometown popped into my head. I grew up in Concord,

Massachusetts, near Lowell, where a host of empty textile mills mark the landscape. This is how I pictured the mental utilization of the crew—sitting idle.

Another thing bothered me as well. Who, exactly, was the “they” in the statement “whatever they tell me to do”? Wasn’t “they” us?

• • •

Once I understood the pervasive influence that our structure of leader-follower had on our way of doing business, I saw examples of it everywhere I looked: in the way we conducted operations, the end-of-day checkout, the structure of the meetings, the routing of the message boards, the quarters on the pier.

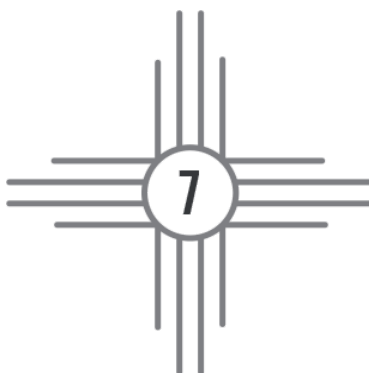
Everything we did reinforced the notion that the guys at the top were the leaders and the rest of the crew were the followers. The problem for *Santa Fe* wasn’t an absence of leadership. It was too much leadership of the wrong kind, the leader-follower kind.

I could also see the costs of leader-follower in the passivity of the sailors at quarters, in the lack of initiative, in the waiting for others, in the department heads’ paralysis without the CO at the department head meetings.

Everything would have to change.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Why is doing what you are told appealing to some?
- Do people really just want to do as they are told?
- If a snapshot of your business went viral on the Internet, what would it reveal about your workers?
- Do your procedures reinforce the leader-follower model?
- How would your middle managers react if you implemented a checkout system like the one described in this chapter?



“I Relieve You!”

Is your organization spending more energy trying to avoid errors than achieving excellence? We were.

January 8, 1999: Submarine Base, Pearl Harbor (172 days to deployment)

Freshly painted, *Santa Fe* sat proudly next to the pier at Submarine Base Pearl Harbor. The January weather was beautiful: sunny, 75 degrees, and light trade winds. On board the ship a portable platform had been loaded with a podium and four chairs. I was sitting in the second chair, looking across to the pier where the crew, families, and submarine community of Pearl Harbor were sitting under tents. In a few minutes, I would be taking command of a nuclear-powered warship and instantly become responsible for the taxpayers' \$2 billion investment and 135 men. I would be responsible for preparing the warship to take the fight to the enemy and return home. It was a daunting task. It had come faster than I could have imagined, and I certainly didn't feel ready.

The authorities and responsibilities of the commanding officer, or captain, are specified in U.S. Navy Regulations:

The responsibility of the commanding officer for his or her command is absolute . . . While the commanding officer may, at his or her discretion, and when not contrary to law or regulations, delegate authority to subordinates for the execution of details, such delegation of authority shall in no way relieve the commanding officer of continued responsibility for the safety, well-being and efficiency of the entire command (Section 0802).^{[6](#)}

Delegation is the exception, not the rule. This issue of absolute responsibility has been a fundamental aspect of naval service since the United States Navy was crafted in the image of the Royal Navy. If the ship started to sink right at that moment, I would not be responsible. If it started to sink an hour later, it would be my responsibility, 100 percent. I would be accountable. While that singular point of accountability is attractive in many ways, there is a downside. The previous commanding officer would not be held accountable. Thus, as I pointed out earlier, each CO is encouraged to maximize performance for his tour and his tour alone. There is no incentive or reward for developing mechanisms that enable excellence beyond your immediate tour. Imagine the impact of this on the thousands of decisions made by the commanding officers throughout the Navy.

For example, in Section 0851 in the Navy Regulations on action with the enemy, the CO is directed to take the following action:

Before going into battle or action communicate to the officers of the command, if possible, his or her plans for battle or action and such other information as may be of operational value should any of them succeed to command.

It might seem amazing that we feel it necessary to tell commanding officers to communicate the battle plan to their subordinates before going into

combat, “if possible.” If the crew doesn’t know and understand the battle plan before then, defeat is almost certain.

But those Navy regs are describing the top-down, aloof, leader-follower structure that naval officers learn. Leader-follower is the image that comes to mind when we think of the confident, resolute commanding officer boldly leading his crew into battle. We think this is good leadership.

As I sat there on the dais musing about what I was soon to be accountable for, I thought back to my introduction to *Santa Fe* and took stock of what we had going for us.

First, the crew wanted change, even if they didn’t know quite how to do it. When I asked the men what I shouldn’t change, what worked particularly well, I didn’t get a lot of answers. The frustration, wasted hours, and mediocre results of the previous year had convinced them they needed to do something else. Ultimately, we were to introduce a way of doing business that would be different from what they’d experienced before and would spare them the pain they’d suffered earlier on board. Without the thirst for change it would have been difficult to get the crew to accept an entirely new way of thinking about leadership. This call to action would be necessary for the changes I had in mind.

Second, we had an incredibly supportive chain of command. My bosses, Commodore Mark Kenny and Rear Admiral Al Konetzni, Commander, Submarine Forces, Pacific (COMSUBPAC or CSP), were ready to give me all the encouragement I needed—and all the rope I needed to hang myself. They were outcome focused. They didn’t care or need to know the specifics of what we were going to do as long as the evidence showed that the submarine was improving in performance, war-fighting capability, and morale. This was good because I’m not sure I could have articulated the path ahead, and even if I had, I’m not sure they would have bought it.

Third, my reliance on the crew for the specifics of how the boat operated prevented me from falling into old habits and the trap of leader-follower. I couldn’t have operated that way if I’d wanted to. There were many times I had the impulse to give specific direction but I couldn’t. Although I cursed my lack of technical knowledge, it prevented me from falling back on bad habits. In the past when I would interview a crew member about how something worked, I only acted curious because, in reality, I knew how it worked. Now, when I talked to the men on the ship, I actually was curious.

Finally, it seemed clear that the crew was in a self-reinforcing downward spiral where poor practices resulted in mistakes, mistakes resulted in poor morale, and poor morale resulted in avoiding initiative and going into a survival mode of doing only what was absolutely necessary. In order to break this cycle, I'd need to radically change the daily motivation by shifting the focus from avoiding errors to achieving excellence.

Mechanism: Achieve Excellence, Don't Just Avoid Errors

In the nuclear-powered submarine Navy we focus on errors. We track them, we report them, and we attempt to understand the reasons for them. There is a powerful and effective culture of open and honest discussion about what went wrong and what could have gone better. What happens then is that we evaluate ships based on the mistakes they make. Avoiding mistakes becomes the prime focus of the crew and leadership.

What happened with *Santa Fe*, however, was that the crew was becoming gun-shy about making mistakes. The best way not to make a mistake is not to do anything or make any decisions. It dawned on me the day I assumed command that focusing on avoiding errors is helpful for understanding the mechanics of procedures and detecting impending major problems before they occur, but it is a debilitating approach when adopted as the objective of an organization.

You are destined to fail. No matter how good you get at avoiding mistakes, you will always have errors on something as complex as a submarine. You might reduce the number and severity, but there will never be zero. They may be such minor errors as reading a gauge wrong or scheduling two conflicting events, but people always make mistakes. Thus, they always feel bad about themselves. In the same vein, success is a negative, an absence of failure, avoidance of a critique or an incident. Sadly, a common joke on *Santa Fe* was "Your reward is no punishment."

Focusing on avoiding mistakes takes our focus away from becoming truly exceptional. Once a ship has achieved success merely in the form of

preventing major errors and is operating in a competent way, mission accomplished, there is no need to strive further.

I resolved to change this. Our goal would be excellence instead of error reduction. We would focus on exceptional operational effectiveness for the submarine. We would achieve great things.

Part of achieving excellence would be acquiring an intimate understanding of errors, that is, what caused them and what we needed to do to eliminate them. But that intimate understanding would not be the thing the crew needed to be thinking about as they reported for duty. Reducing mistakes would be an important side benefit to attaining our primary goal, achieving excellence. Excellence was going to be more than a philosophy statement pasted to the bulkhead; it was going to be how we lived, ate, and slept.

My thoughts turned sharply back to the present. I heard the outgoing CO come to the end of his speech. I stood, and with the words “I relieve you,” became the commanding officer of *Santa Fe*. I turned to Commodore Kenny and reported I had relieved as CO *Santa Fe*.

I was now totally accountable for *Santa Fe* and committed myself to that role with the following words:

I believe the personal freedoms, respect for human dignity, and economic prosperity we enjoy in the United States are unique throughout the history of mankind and across the span of the globe.

I believe that this is not a natural state but one which must be worked for relentlessly, and, if necessary, defended.

I believe the men who sallied forth from these very piers in boats like *Tang*, *Wahoo*, and *Barb* were engaged in an honorable and worthwhile endeavor.

I believe those eternally on patrol beyond the reef did not die in vain. The future depends upon those willing to continue that honorable and worthwhile endeavor. Accordingly, I reaffirm my vow to defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

Shipmates of *Santa Fe*, I will be proud to sail with you.

Thank you.

I sat down.

I was ready to go to work. We were scheduled to deploy in 172 days. As I looked across at the officers, chiefs, and sailors assembled on the pier, I knew we should start in the middle. We would start with the chiefs.

• • •

Going to sea in a submarine, leaving your family for six months, is hard work. Honorable work, but hard work. These guys weren't going to become rich looting enemy ships; they weren't in it for themselves. Fear was pervasive and we needed to turn that around.

Connecting our day-to-day activities to something larger was a strong motivator for the crew. The connection was there but it had been lost. Instead, in ways large and small, I encountered situations where the crew's actions were motivated by following a checklist, pleasing an inspector, looking good, or some other variant of "avoiding problems."

I, we, needed everyone to see the ultimate purpose for the submarine and remember that it was a noble purpose. I also wanted to connect our current endeavors with the submarine force's rich legacy of service to and sacrifice for the country. Once the crewmen remembered what we were doing and why, they would do anything to support the mission. This was a stark contrast to earlier, when people were coming to work simply with the hope of not screwing up.

ACHIEVE EXCELLENCE, DON'T JUST AVOID ERRORS is a mechanism for CLARITY. (The book to read is Simon Sinek's *Start with Why*.)

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Are your people trying to achieve excellence or just to avoid making mistakes?
- Has your organization become action-averse because taking action sometimes results in errors?

- Have you let error-reduction programs sap the lifeblood out of initiative and risk taking?
- Do you spend more time critiquing errors than celebrating success?
- Are you able to identify the symptoms of avoiding errors in your workplace?
- When you ask people what their jobs are, do they answer in terms of reducing errors?
- When you investigate the criteria that went behind decisions, do you find that avoidance of negative outcomes far outweighs accomplishing positive outcomes?
- What is the primary motivation of the middle managers and rank and file (not what it says on the wall poster outside the boardroom)?
- How can you minimize errors but not make that the focus of your organization?

PART II

CONTROL

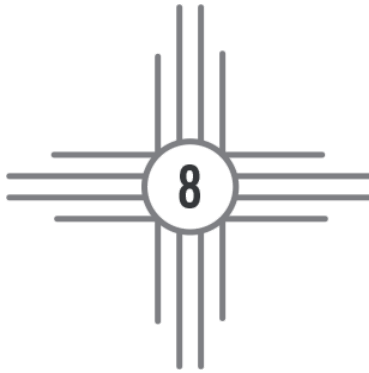
My primary focus when I assumed command of *Santa Fe* was to divest control and distribute it to the officers and crew. Control is about making decisions concerning not only how we are going to work but also toward what end.

A submarine has a built-in structure whereby information is channeled up the chain of command to decision makers. Instead, we were going to deconstruct decision authority and push it down to where the information lived. We called this “Don’t move information to authority, move authority to the information.”

The chapters in this part will introduce you to the initial set of mechanisms we devised to implement leader-leader practices. I’ve organized the mechanisms into three groups: control, competence, and clarity. Although the initial focus was on redistributing control, it was necessary to work in all three areas.

- Find the genetic code for control and rewrite it.
- Act your way to new thinking.
- Short, early conversations make efficient work.
- Use “I intend to . . .” to turn passive followers into active leaders.
- Resist the urge to provide solutions.
- Eliminate top-down monitoring systems.

- Think out loud (both superiors and subordinates).
- Embrace the inspectors.



Change, in a Word

What's the best way to change decision-making authorities in your organization? Turns out it's pretty easy once you commit to changing.

**January 8, 1999: Old Periscope Facility,
Submarine Base, Pearl Harbor (172 days to
deployment)**

Later that afternoon, I sat with the chiefs of *Santa Fe* in the defunct World War II periscope repair facility. Now a tired and unassuming two-story building next to the piers, this structure had once been a constant scene of activity as technicians worked to refurbish and focus the periscopes of American submarines. These were the tools that such men as Dick O'Kane, Mush Morton, and Gene Fluckey would use to achieve victory against the Empire of Japan. The periscope repair functions had moved to a larger and more up-to-date facility a hundred yards away, and the original facility was now an informal lounge. The room was hot and uncomfortable. We sat on

recycled furniture with a squeaky ceiling fan turning slowly above us and the windows opened to let in the slight breeze.

If I started at the top, with the XO, COB, and department heads, we would be using a top-down approach to implement a bottom-up leadership philosophy. That was inherently contradictory. Additionally, that would involve only six people and wouldn't create a critical mass of participation. The junior officers weren't a good place to start because they had lost credibility in the command and would still have to learn the basics of leadership. Starting at the bottom, with the junior enlisted men, probably wouldn't work either. There was too much distance between them and me, and without support in the rest of the command, they would be viewed suspiciously. So here I was with the chiefs.

I had suffered through many wasted hours listening to lectures about how we should "work together," "take initiative," and the like. These weren't backed up with mechanisms that actually enabled or rewarded these behaviors, so the speeches were worse than nothing at all; they sounded hypocritical and the speakers out of touch.

I was resolved to avoid this altogether. Instead of trying to change mind-sets and then change the way we acted, we would start acting differently and the new thinking would follow. Or so I hoped. Besides, we didn't have time for a long gestation period. We needed change now!

I wasn't 100 percent sure that the chiefs would bite. I was confident in the support of the chief of the boat (COB). As the senior enlisted man, he was organizationally committed to supporting me. I was less confident about the rest. I was sorry that Senior Chief Andy Worshek, the senior sonarman and weapons department chief, was on leave. I knew he would have been an ally. I looked around; Chief John Larson, an electronics technician (ET), sat opposite me. He had struck me as thoughtful and eager to learn. Chief Brad Jensen, the senior nuclear chief (we called him the bull nuke), and his nuke chiefs sat together. They'd likely be on board.

I was glad to see Chief David Steele in the group. After our earlier conversation, he had gone home and talked to his wife. They agreed to give the new command a chance, and he withdrew his transfer request. His positive nodding was already influencing the men around him in a good way as the meeting began.

My flashlight was superfluous but I had brought it anyway. Brandishing it, I opened with a question: “Men, we say the chiefs run the Navy. Is this true on *Santa Fe*?”

Reflexively they answered, Yes! Uh-huh. Of course!

“Really?”

“Well . . .” came the second round of answers, as most of them looked at the floor. Apparently not so much on *Santa Fe*.

They were right. The chiefs did not run the Navy and they did not run the *Santa Fe*. The authority of the chief petty officers had long been eroded away. The reasons for this were both institutional and human. The institutional problem was that the desire to have the commanding officer uniquely and completely accountable for the ship ran counter to allowing the chiefs the authority to manage things. Admiral Hyman Rickover and the nuclear-powered Navy implemented a highly successful program with an unparalleled safety record. From an organizational perspective, the accountability of the commanding officers was heavily stressed. Their selection and training were incredibly important. The department heads approved operations, and the department head or captain authorized maintenance. A long list of activities and evolutions could be performed only with the specific permission of the CO, and so on.

These practices reinforced leader-follower in the submarine force. As a result, the performance of the submarines was directly coupled with the technical ability of the CO. As I’ve already mentioned, some ships would do well under one CO and then poorly under the next.

At the same time, the naval nuclear propulsion program has succeeded in developing an alternative to the personality-centered leadership approach: a procedurally centered leadership structure in which the procedure reigns supreme. This structure is effective when it comes to operating a nuclear reactor. The system is well defined and predictable: people are highly trained and the operators follow the procedure! Actually, as a citizen of the planet, you want this procedurally centered leadership when it comes to operating the reactor plant. The range of potential conditions and responses is bounded. It is when operators don’t follow procedures that very unpredictable, and typically bad, things happen.

Yet this emphasis on following the procedure can have a stultifying effect. We take bright operators, train them extensively, and then tell them that the

most important thing is to follow the procedure.

When it comes to operating a submarine against the enemy, the application of this procedurally centered approach is limiting, both in how the submarine is employed and in how the intellect of the operators is employed. Fundamentally, tactical operations of the submarine are different from reactor plant operations. Tactical operations are against an intelligent enemy who thinks, plots, and deliberately exploits weaknesses. The complexity is significantly higher. Strictly following procedures won't get us there. At this point, we fall back on the personality-centered leadership structure.

In reversing years of the leader-follower system's erosion of the chiefs' authority, the chiefs on board *Santa Fe*—now under my command—would be going against the grain. I wanted to make sure they deliberately decided to take charge. It wouldn't be any good if I directed them. You can't invoke leader-follower rules to direct a shift from leader-follower to leader-leader.

To say these guys were skeptical would be an understatement. Sure, they sensed that things could have been better but, after all, *Santa Fe* hadn't had a collision, grounding, or truly significant incident. Was it performing that poorly?

Furthermore, they'd been in the Navy for fifteen years, on average, and it had always been this way on all their other submarines. Was it possible that a better way existed?

My next question built on what we had all agreed on, namely, the chiefs did not run *Santa Fe*.

I asked, "Do you want to?"

Reflexively they answered, Yes! Uh-huh. Of course!

"Really?"

And that's when we began to talk honestly about what the chiefs' running the submarine would mean.

Mechanism: Find the Genetic Code for Control and Rewrite It

Here is a list of the primary problems the chiefs struggled with:

- Below-average advancement rates for their men
- A lengthy qualification program that yielded few qualified watch standers
- Poor performance on evaluations for the ship
- A lean watch bill, with many watch stations port and starboard under way, and three-section in port (the objective was to have three-section at sea and at least four-section in port; this meant that each member would stand watch every third watch rotation—typically six hours on watch and twelve hours off—at sea, and every fourth day in port)
- An inability to schedule, control, and commence work on time
- An inability to control the schedules of their division and men.

We talked about the reality that running *Santa Fe* would mean they would be accountable for the performance of their divisions. No more sitting in the cozy chiefs' quarters and letting the department head or division officer explain to the captain why things had gone wrong. Later, I would call this "eyeball accountability." It would mean being intimately involved—physically present in most cases—in the operations of the ship and in each activity.

The chiefs' enthusiasm waned noticeably. Some could see this would change the way they would have to think about their position: being the chief would no longer mean a position of privilege but a position of accountability, responsibility, and work. Not everyone thought this would be better. We discussed this long and hard, but didn't waste time discussing the philosophy of the role of the chief petty officer in today's Navy or on exhortations and speeches. We didn't have time for those luxuries.

At the end, we were agreed: the sole output would be concrete mechanisms. I was thinking about Jim Collins and Jerry Porras's book *Built to Last* and their discussion of how personalities come and go but institutional mechanisms endure and embed the change in the organization. I put this question to *Santa Fe*'s chiefs: "What can we do so that you actually run the ship?"

First and foremost, the chiefs wanted to be in charge of their own men, and that meant putting them in charge of their men's leave. Some of the chiefs protested, claiming they were already in charge of their leave. But after the COB signed the leave chit—and he did so for every enlisted man—it still needed to be signed by three officers: the division officer, the department head, and the XO. The chiefs weren't in charge.

The chiefs came up with a solution: could the COB be the final signature authority for the enlisted leave chits? It was brilliantly simple. Instead of making a fourteen-step process more efficient (seven steps up through the enlisted chain of command and the COB, to the division officer, department head, and XO, and seven steps down), we would eliminate six of the steps. I just needed to cross out XO and write in COB in the ship's regulations. A one-word change. That was the genetic code. That was what they were proposing.

I was reluctant to agree for a couple of reasons. In my previous jobs, I had countermanded ill-thought-out leave plans from the chiefs. Knowing the officers above them would likely veto excessive leave plans and wanting to be the nice guys, the chiefs tended to say "yes" a lot. Additionally, I was concerned that the junior officers would lose the experience of learning personnel management and lose touch with their divisions. Finally, and perhaps most important, the CO wasn't authorized to make this change. The submarine organization manual was a Navy document that we weren't supposed to change.

We discussed some of these drawbacks, and the chiefs offered their solution. The chiefs would be responsible for the performance of their divisions and all that encompassed. I agreed and made the change to the manual that afternoon. In command less than a day and I'd already exceeded my authority.

This one-word administrative change put the chiefs squarely in charge of all aspects of managing their men, including their watch bills, qualification schedules, and training school enrollments. The only way the chiefs could own the leave planning was if they owned the watch bill. The only way they could own the watch bill was if they owned the qualification process. It turned out that managing leave was only the tip of the iceberg and that it rested on a large supporting base of other work. It was hugely powerful. We called it "Chiefs in Charge."

Because we had just removed a significant amount of the XO's authority by eliminating him from the process of signing the enlisted leave chits, I needed to do something to show that I was walking the walk. Therefore, I delegated the control of all officer leave, which I was required to sign, to the XO. This was consistent with what we'd done with the chiefs, and also beyond my authority.

I wasn't worried about the authority issue, but I was worried about the behavior. If the chiefs continued to be the "good guys" and approve every chit that came their way, the interests of the command would not be protected. As it turned out, however, that didn't happen.

Find Your Organization's Genetic Code for Control

Here's an exercise you can do with your senior leadership at your next off-site.

- Identify in the organization's policy documents where decision-making authority is specified. (You can do this ahead of time if you want.)
- Identify decisions that are candidates for being pushed to the next lower level in the organization.
- For the easiest decisions, first draft language that changes the person who will have decision-making authority. In some cases, large decisions may need to be disaggregated.
- Next, ask each participant in the group to complete the following sentence on the five-by-eight card provided: "When I think about delegating this decision, I worry that . . ."
- Post those cards on the wall, go on a long break, and let the group mill around the comments posted on the wall.
- Last, when the group reconvenes, sort and rank the worries and begin to attack them.

When I've conducted this exercise, I usually find that the worries fall into two broad categories: issues of competence and issues of clarity. People are worried that the next level down won't make good decisions, either because they lack the technical competence about the subject or because they don't understand what the organization is trying to accomplish. Both of these can be resolved.

• • •

FIND THE GENETIC CODE AND REWRITE IT is a mechanism for CONTROL. The first step in changing the genetic code of any organization or system is delegating control, or decision-making authority, as much as is comfortable, and then adding a pinch more. This isn't an empowerment "program." It's changing the way the organization controls decisions in an enduring, personal way.

In the example I just shared, there was nothing technically complicated about signing a leave chit. The barriers had to do with trusting that the chiefs understood the goals of *Santa Fe* the way I did. I call this organizational clarity, or just clarity. (I describe this in greater detail in the chapters in Part IV.) You tackle it by being honest about what you intend to achieve and communicating that all the time, at every level.

Many empowerment programs fail because they are just that, "programs" or "initiatives" rather than the central principle—the genetic code, if you will—behind how the organization does business. You can't "direct" empowerment programs. Directed empowerment programs are flawed because they are predicated on this assumption: I have the authority and ability to empower you (and you don't). Fundamentally, that's disempowering. This internal contradiction dooms these initiatives. We say "empowerment" but do it in a way that is disempowering. The practice outweighs the rhetoric.

In a broader sense, this mechanism highlights the point that we didn't give speeches or discuss a philosophical justification for the changes we were going to make. Rather, we searched for the organizational practices and procedures that would need to be changed in order to bring the change to life with the greatest impact. My goal, professionally and personally, was to implement enduring mechanisms that would embed the goodness of the

organization in the submarine's people and practices and wouldn't rely on my personality to make it happen.

• • •

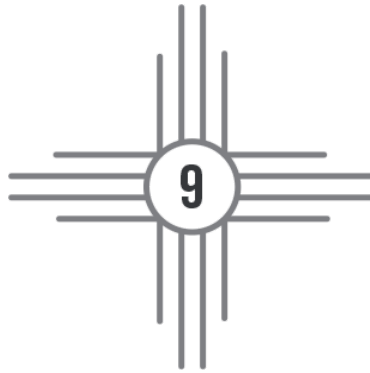
We expanded the power of the chiefs several times during the three years I was on *Santa Fe*. We started with giving them control over their men's leave. The next iteration was to make sure there was a chief who was in charge of every evolution. I wanted to make sure it was clear whenever something happened on the submarine that some chief was responsible for making sure it came out right. The mechanism was to add a line to our planning documents that listed the "Chief in Charge" next to each event. I learned that focusing on who was put in charge was more important than trying to evaluate all the ways the event could go wrong. These "Chiefs in Charge" initiatives were instrumental in *Santa Fe's* winning the award for the best chiefs' quarters for the next seven years in a row.

We discovered that distributing control by itself wasn't enough. As that happened, it put requirements on the new decision makers to have a higher level of technical knowledge and clearer sense of organizational purpose than ever before. That's because decisions are made against a set of criteria that includes what's technically appropriate and what aligns with the organization's interests. In later chapters, you'll be introduced to mechanisms that address both of these supporting pillars.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How can you prepare your mid-level managers to shift from holding a "position of privilege" to one of "accountability, responsibility, and work"?
- What procedure or process can you change with one word that will give your mid-level managers more decision-making authority?
- When thinking about delegating control, what do you worry about?

- What do you as a proponent of the leader-leader approach need to delegate to show you are willing to walk the talk?



“Welcome Aboard *Santa Fe!*”

Don't like something about the “culture” in your organization and want to change it? We did this in a simple way.

**January 11, 1999: Pearl Harbor, Hawaii
(169 days to deployment)**

The buzz of excitement filled the air on board the USS *Santa Fe* Monday morning as the chiefs started talking about their new authority. The sailors took notice and, accordingly, there was more spring in their step as we went about the work of the day. It seemed that the direct connection between the chiefs, who were responsible for making the work come out right, and the sailors, who were the performers of the valve lineups, maintenance procedures, and operational tasks, had engaged both the troops and the supervisors alike. There was greater commitment, greater engagement.

Military discipline improved as well. In the past, some of the junior enlisted men would mouth off to their chiefs. (We called this showing

“attitude,” which is not a good thing.) Since each chief’s authority to discipline them for their remarks was minimal, these puerile enlisted men could afford to complain; the cost was low. Now, with the chiefs’ having more authority, the junior enlisted men were motivated to suppress their immature responses and get to the work of the day. So far, so good.

Overall, the mood was upbeat. Yet there was so much to do. We were deploying in 169 days; more urgently, prior to deployment there would be a series of inspections of increasing complexity. We were scheduled to get under way in eight days to do the first of these: an inspection conducted by my immediate superior, Commodore Mark Kenny. He and his squadron staff were going to be riding us for four days, observing *Santa Fe* perform a host of submarine operations.

I wasn’t sure how we could possibly do well. The knowledge gaps were so big and the operational practice so rusty there was no way we could learn and practice everything we needed to do in the next week. Besides, we had a full 24/7 job just finalizing the repairs and maintenance from the past month, loading stores, and preparing the charts and operational plan to get under way on time.

Not only did we need to demonstrate to the squadron staff that we were competent; we needed a success in support of the changes I needed to make because not everyone understood how this new scheme was going to work. I already had skeptics among the crew.

I tried to understand the skeptics’ position. One thing that bothered them was that this way of doing business was different from what they had been doing before—on *Santa Fe* and on every other submarine in the force. There were two components to this. First, many of the chiefs had served on two, three, or even four submarines. No one else had authorized the COB to be the final authority on enlisted leave. Heck, they’d never even heard of it. Was it possible that a way of doing business no one had ever heard of could be better than what the Navy had been doing for more than one hundred years? It was a legitimate question.

Second, there was the fear and cost of being different. Even if we demonstrated that this was a better way, did we want to operate differently from the other fifty-five nuclear-powered attack submarines in the Navy? Several advisers asked me point-blank if I was willing to take the career risk. “Why don’t you just be like everyone else, do the normal things, build

teamwork, enforce standards, conduct training?” they’d suggest. “If things go well with your new program, great, but if things don’t go well, there will be a long line of people saying, ‘Well, he did things differently from the rest of us.’”

Chalk it up to being left-handed, perhaps, but I didn’t feel any of this fear myself. As I thought about it, pushing authority down could only be good. I remembered how I had felt on board the *Sunfish* when my CO let me run my own watch team and how powerful that was. I remembered how I had reverted to top-down leadership on the *Will Rogers* as well, and how dispiriting that was.

Right or wrong, I was committed to doing whatever I thought was best for *Santa Fe*, the Navy, and the nation without worrying about the repercussions. I called this the paradox of “caring but not caring”—that is, caring intimately about your subordinates and the organization but caring little about the organizational consequences to yourself.

Despite the skeptics, enough of the team was willing to try our new approach and give me the benefit of the doubt. Some were enthusiastically sold and formed the core of advocates. The skeptics were willing to give it a shot, although less enthusiastically. They weren’t going to get in the way.

The morning wardroom meeting was my first substantive session with the officers. I had told them to bring all the leave chits they had in their inboxes, and I collected them at the meeting to give to the COB. The pile of unapproved leave chits was significant and provided a physical context for the changes we were making. We had an initiative going for the chiefs, but I wanted to come up with something for the entire ship. The officers would help me craft it.

Mechanism: Act Your Way to New Thinking

One of the things I heard during my turnover discussions was that they wanted to change the morale among the crew. We invest an average of \$50,000 to recruit a sailor, then another \$100,000 to train a submarine sailor and give that individual significant responsibility at sea. On board *Santa Fe*, almost none of the enlisted men had stayed beyond their initial tour of duty.

Of a crew of 135, only 3 sailors reenlisted in 1998. Two of the junior officers, who are trained at an even greater cost, had already submitted their resignations.

How do you raise morale quickly? It didn't seem like you could just order a cultural change like this. And yet, that's just what we did.

I asked the officers how we would know if the crew were proud of the boat. What would we observe? There was silence. Apparently these officers weren't accustomed to being involved. I pointed my flashlight at one of the junior officers. "You go first," I commanded, and after he spoke, others volunteered their own opinions:

- They'd brag about it to their family and friends!
- They'd look visitors in the eye when they met them in the passageway!
- They'd wear their *Santa Fe* ball caps as much as possible!
- They'd boast to their friends on other submarines!
- They'd buy *Santa Fe* lighters, pens, and pins from the ship's store!

Well, what if we just tell them to act that way? I suggested. What if we just tell them to greet people respectfully, sincerely, and proudly? Could we act, or talk, our way into a new way of thinking?

This sparked a vigorous debate. Some thought that would be like putting the cart before the horse. First, we needed to create a work environment that would give the men respect and dignity; a place they were happy to go to each day. Then behavior would change, and morale would improve naturally, on its own. Others thought we could talk ourselves into it, almost fake it.

I decided we would try the route of talking ourselves into a new way of thinking. We called it the "three-name rule" and this is how it worked: When any member of the crew saw a visitor on our boat (and we were specifically thinking about the following week, when Commodore Kenny and his staff were coming down for the inspection), he was to greet the visitor using three names—the visitor's name, his own name, and the ship's name. For example, "Good morning, Commodore Kenny, my name is Petty Officer Jones, welcome aboard *Santa Fe*."

On the pier at quarters the next day, I started explaining the three-name rule to the crew. Almost immediately I stopped; as was normal, the crew stood in formation behind the officers and chiefs and I knew that most of those in the back couldn't hear what I was saying. I waved my arms and shouted, "Gather round." It wasn't in the book of commands, but everyone knew what I wanted. The men moved forward. Now I was in a tight and intimate huddle of a hundred men. It wasn't something General Patton would have been proud of, but it definitely seemed better. The officers and chiefs were still in front, but because I interacted with that group frequently, I sent them to the back. From that moment on, at quarters the crew would gather around me and the khakis (officers and chiefs) would stand in back.

I went on to tell the crew what we wanted going forward. We had seven days to finish putting the boat back together and head to sea. We had torpedoes to prepare, maintenance to complete, repairs to finish, charts to prepare, stores to load, and a number of other things to accomplish. So, I resisted giving a big lecture about the reasons why we wanted to use the three-name rule and about respecting their time and their need to get back to work. Instead, I just explained the rule and acted it out.

How to Embed a Cultural Change in Your Organization

Starting condition: you've had a discussion with your leadership group and identified some sort of cultural change the group mostly agrees to. What you want to do now is embed it into the organization, independent of personality.

- Hand out five-by-eight cards. Have people complete the following sentence: "I'd know we achieved [this cultural change] if I saw employees . . ." (The specific wording in this question should move you from general, unmeasurable answers like "Have people be creative" to specific, measurable ones like "Employees submit at least one idea a quarter. The ideas are posted and other employees can comment on them.")

- Allow five minutes. Then tape the cards on the wall, go on break, and have everyone mill around reading the cards.
- Based on the discussions and quantity of answers, you may want to give everyone a second shot at filling out the cards.
- Sort and prioritize the answers.
- Then discuss how to code the behavior into the company's practices. For example: implementing the three-name rule.
- The final step is to write the new practices into the appropriate company procedure.

When you're trying to change employees' behaviors, you have basically two approaches to choose from: change your own thinking and hope this leads to new behavior, or change your behavior and hope this leads to new thinking. On board *Santa Fe*, the officers and I did the latter, acting our way to new thinking. We didn't have time to change thinking and let that percolate and ultimately change people's actions; we just needed to change the behavior. Frankly, I didn't care whether people thought differently at some point—and they eventually did—so long as they behaved in certain ways. I think there were likely some sailors who never understood what we were trying to do and resisted the change to leader-leader, but they behaved as if they believed.

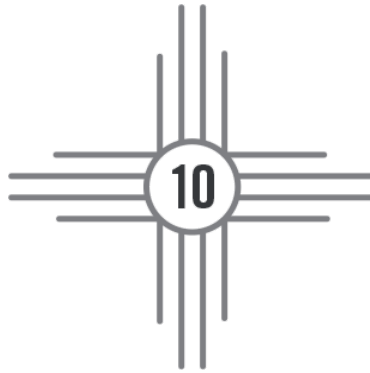
Some observers attributed the low morale on *Santa Fe* to the long hours. I didn't think so. I felt it had more to do with focusing on reducing errors instead of accomplishing something great and the resultant feeling of ineffectiveness that had permeated the ship.

The sense on board was that we were not proactive movers but only passive reactors to external events. The schedule was against us, the parts didn't arrive on time, the detailers didn't give *Santa Fe* sailors the jobs they wanted, the torpedo missed because of "bad luck." There was an emphasis on blaming what was happening on outside influences and factors, and the crew evidenced a collective lack of responsibility. This feeling of victimhood went hand in hand with the low morale. One of the things the three-name rule accomplished was that it got rid of that sense of being victims of our circumstances. In a small way, each sailor on board *Santa Fe* was now taking charge of his destiny.

ACTING YOUR WAY TO NEW THINKING is a mechanism for CONTROL.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How do you respond when people in your workplace don't want to change from the way things have always been done?
- What are some of the costs associated with doing things differently in your industry?
- Do we act first, and think later? Or do we think first, and then change our actions?



Under Way on Nuclear Power

Do you play “bring me a rock” in your organization, where vague understanding of the goal results in wasted time? We did, and we needed to change that.

**January 20, 1999: Pearl Harbor, Hawaii
(160 days to deployment)**

I'd been in command twelve days. The sun was getting low on the horizon as I fidgeted on the bridge of *Santa Fe*. We were awaiting the clearance message from the maintenance facility that approved the repairs we'd made and authorized us to get under way. That the message was late was our fault. A couple of minor retests had held us up; nothing as bad as on board the *Will Rogers*, though. The tugboat was made up alongside. Much longer and we'd have had to delay a day before setting to sea. That would knock out one of our four days of preparation before we came in to pick up Commodore Mark Kenny and the inspection team.

The speaker on the bridge crackled. “Captain, XO, clearance message on board.”

The officer of the deck (OOD) turned to me. “Captain, all departments report readiness to get under way. Request permission to get under way.”

“Get under way!” I responded.

The tug pulled the bow away from the pier, and we silently slipped into the channel and headed to sea. The magic of the moment when the ship has cast off the last lines both to shore and to the tug never loses its potency. That particular moment was no exception.

This was great fun. When I gave orders, big things happened! I would say “submerge the ship” and we would dive under the ocean. “Ahead flank” and *Santa Fe* surged through the water, “Bring the ship to periscope depth” and officers executed a procedure to safely bring *Santa Fe* just under the surface of the Pacific Ocean.

This was welcome action in contrast to the previous weeks’ trials. In addition to the material issues of putting the boat back together, we had some struggles in preparing ourselves operationally. The crew was still focusing too much on complying with regulations rather than working to make our submarine the most operationally capable warship possible. It was the same problem as focusing on avoiding mistakes instead of trying to achieve something great. A typical example involved the preparation of the underway charts.

Perfect, but Irrelevant

Nautical charts are the foundation for nuclear submarine operations. They serve as maps, showing the routes we must follow to avoid buoys, shallows, and other submarines while at the same time achieving our operational objectives. In the upcoming exercise, we had to locate an enemy submarine, monitor its activities, and if directed, sink it. We knew the focus of the operations would be in the Maui basin—the area between Maui, Lanai, and Molokai. It is an area of shallow water and has an uneven bottom that makes submarining there difficult.

Chart preparations consisted of three phases. In phase one, the quartermasters took the large paper charts and made sure they were up-to-date with information from the latest Coast Guard-issued “Notice to Mariners.” There might be additional hazards to navigation, such as the setting or moving of a buoy, since the submarine last moved through those waters. In addition, the paper charts had to be prepared according to submarine force instructions, such as highlighting the one-hundred-fathom curve and marking points ten miles from shoal water and twelve miles from land.

Phase two consisted of laying out our assigned water. Since submarines are large, quiet objects, we assign them different blocks of water so they can move safely without fear of collisions. These blocks designate depth zones and geographic zones and change throughout the day and week. It’s imperative that these charts be absolutely correct; otherwise, you might inadvertently operate in water assigned to another submarine, risking collision. If you discovered yourself in this position, you would surface immediately and report the incident.

The third, final phase consisted of integrating the operational plan with the chart. This involved laying down a track within the assigned water to accomplish the anticipated mission. This included the specific courses, speeds, and depth zones *Santa Fe* would use.

The charts then went through a laborious review process starting with the quartermasters who prepared them and moving up through the assistant navigator (ANAV), the navigator (Lieutenant Commander Bill Greene), and with final approval by the captain—me.

In response to a recent navigational problem on another submarine, a force-wide directive had added the XO, second in command, to the review process. The Navy commonly added such steps for the force to perform in order to prevent recurrence. (Steps are rarely removed.) Unfortunately, often these additional steps don’t prevent recurrence and sometimes make matters worse. It’s like adding inspectors at the end of the process to see if it’s gone well—extra work without making anything better.

As the time for underway got closer, I became anxious because I hadn’t seen the charts. Bill Greene kept telling me they were “almost ready.” Finally, on Sunday, with underway scheduled for Tuesday, he called me to say he was ready to review the charts.

After all those steps in the review process, they were perfect—but irrelevant.

The charts were perfect in that they complied with all the rules and regulations. No inspector could have found a deficiency. They were irrelevant because even though the review team factored in where the operational plan had the submarine going, I knew we wouldn't be using the route they proposed.

The quartermasters who prepared the charts knew we would end up in the Maui basin, but they didn't know which of the three paths we'd take to get there: north of Molokai, between Molokai and Lanai, or south of Lanai. They plotted the navigationally better route, which was north of Molokai. This was open water and the fastest route, but it wasn't the way the enemy submarine would go and, hence, wasn't the way we needed to go.

None of the reviews up the chain of command noted this problem because the reviews were all focused on making sure the charts were navigationally and procedurally correct, not on enabling *Santa Fe* to be an operationally effective warship. In short, the reviews were focused on avoiding errors, as opposed to accomplishing something.

There was another human tendency working against us as well. Subordinates generally desire to present the boss with a “perfect” product the first time. Unfortunately, this gets in the way of efficiency because significant effort can be wasted. We decided then and there that at each phase in the review process the navigator or the assistant navigator should talk to me. These would be quick conversations. On their part, the review team needed to overcome a fear of criticism of an incomplete plan; on my part, I needed to refrain from jumping in with answers. We boiled this down to this motto: “A little rudder far from the rocks is a lot better than a lot of rudder close to the rocks.”

Mechanism: Short, Early Conversations Make Efficient Work

Not everyone liked this idea. Getting me, the boss, involved in the process risked my losing my level of detachment and being less willing to scrap the

plan and start over because I had been part of its development. At this point, that was a trade-off I was willing to take because I sensed I needed frequent conversations with all levels of the chain of command to ensure that they were working toward accomplishing operational excellence. Later, once the crew had adopted the new philosophy of achieving operational excellence rather than avoiding errors, I would back out of the process.

Beyond this hurdle was another, more basic, problem. The charts were inconsistently drawn. On one chart, the one-hundred-fathom curve was highlighted in yellow, on another, red.

The young officers responsible for executing the ship's mission standing watch as OOD would be presented with different chart legends on different charts and on different days. Yellow would mean something here, something different there. I also imagined running to look at the chart in the middle of the night in a dark control room and not being able to quickly sort out the picture because we hadn't consistently applied color to the charts. These situations spelled nothing but disaster.

Angry that the reviews hadn't focused on the right operational goals, I instinctively wanted to grab the XO and demand improvement. He'd in turn grab Bill Greene, who would grab Chief John Larson and the ANAV, and so on. We'd be adhering to the chain of command, but with only forty-eight hours to get under way, it wouldn't have gotten us ready in time. Further, it would perpetuate the top-down approach I was trying to get away from.

Instead, we gathered all the quartermasters to discuss the issues. I thought the junior sailors would be huffy about being called into a big meeting with the captain when all they wanted was to get the work done. I was wrong.

I laid out my issues with the charts and how I'd come to the conclusions I came to. One of the junior quartermasters, recently qualified to stand watch, was a stocky African-American we called Sled Dog because he would work till he dropped. If you just met him walking through the ship, you would have guessed he was an auxiliaryman, not a quartermaster.

To my surprise, Sled Dog immediately perked up and began offering suggestions. He had clearly been frustrated, toiling away in the dark; now he had a voice. It was a classic case of the workers' being technically competent but unclear about what we were trying to achieve. This inefficient work practice was the antithesis of what we were going to do, and I was glad to have this insight.

When asked about the significance of the different colors chosen for the contour lines, Sled Dog frankly admitted that the curves were highlighted simply based on what colored markers were available at the time.

I wanted the colors to be consistent and to convey information. Someone suggested that we use a modified *National Geographic* scheme: shades of red would represent shallow water, shades of blue deeper water. We also came up with standard schemes for water assignments. *Santa Fe*'s water would always be blue in military exercises (American forces are always "blue"); other submarines would be yellow; areas where we shared water but were separated by depth zone would be—you guessed it—green! A quick look at the chart and each OOD would know instantly that if it was blue, *Santa Fe* owned the water; if it was yellow, we needed to stay out; and if it was green, we needed to maintain a specific depth zone. This worked because the display conventions in efficient symbology and coloring tapped a much larger body of knowledge in your brain. It built on what you already knew. (The book to read on this subject is Edward Tufte's *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*.)

We tried the changes, and after agreeing that they made sense Bill Greene wrote our new procedures up in the Standing Orders. This is where excellence in navigation occurred and where excellence in combat effectiveness started.

• • •

SHORT, EARLY CONVERSATIONS is a mechanism for CONTROL. It is a mechanism for control because the conversations did not consist of me telling them what to do. They were opportunities for the crew to get early feedback on how they were tackling problems. This allowed them to retain control of the solution. These early, quick discussions also provided clarity to the crew about what we wanted to accomplish. Many lasted only thirty seconds, but they saved hours of time.

A commanding officer's attention is no doubt highly valuable time for the organization, and the hierarchy was supposed to protect that time. Inefficiencies in my time were highly visible, especially to me. Less visible, however, were the inefficiencies of all the people throughout the organization. In my organization, even accounting for the difference in the value of our

time, those inefficiencies overwhelmingly outweighed whatever efficiency I was getting with my time as captain.

Furthermore, supervisors needed to recognize that the demand for perfect products the first time they see them results in significant waste and frustration throughout their organization. Even a thirty-second check early on could save your people numerous hours of work. Many, many times I'd be walking around the boat and ask someone, "Show me what you are working on," only to discover that a well-meaning yet erroneous translation of intent was resulting in a significant waste of resources.

Don't You Trust Me?

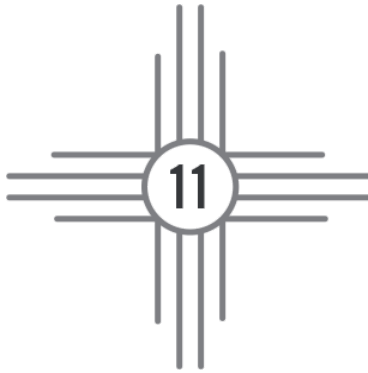
One problem that came up as we spread the idea of these short interactions earlier in the process was the question of trust. I could hear the petty officers complaining that the command "didn't trust them," and sometimes they challenged me directly with that complaint. For a long time this bothered me because I actually did trust them, but I didn't know how to answer the question. Then I realized that we were talking about two totally different things.

Trust means this: when you report that we should position the ship in a certain position, *you believe* we should position the ship as you indicated. Not trusting you would mean that I thought you might be saying one thing while *actually* believing something else. Trust is purely a characteristic of the human relationship. Now, whether the position you indicate is actually the best tactical position for *Santa Fe* is a totally different issue, one of physics, time, distance, and the movements of the enemy. These are characteristics of the physical world and have nothing to do with trust.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How would you counter any reluctance on the part of your team to have early, quick discussions with you, the boss, to make sure projects are on course?

- To what degree is trust present in your organization?
- Is your staff spending time and money creating flawless charts and reports that are, simultaneously, irrelevant?
- What can you do in your organization to add “a little rudder far from the rocks” to prevent needing “a lot of rudder next to the rocks”?
- What commonplace facts can you leverage to make information more valuable and accessible to your employees?
- Have you ever uncovered a “reason why” akin to Sled Dog’s admission that the navigational chart legends depended on whatever color highlighter was at the ready?



“I Intend To . . .”

How proactive are senior managers and employees in your organization?
Rewording our speech dramatically changed our level of proactivity.

January 21, 1999: Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (159 days to deployment)

“Conn, maneuvering, reactor scram!” The reactor had just shut down. The engineer inserted the shutdown deliberately, testing his department’s ability to find and repair a simulated fault.

The four days we had to regain our sea legs until we picked up Commodore Mark Kenny were jammed with training, qualification checkouts, strike exercises, and torpedo loading events. After picking up the inspection team, we would hunt for an enemy submarine heading toward Maui, where we’d shoot some exercise torpedoes against all the targets we were assigned. It would be fun, but I was nervous about how the ship would do. It was going to be our first big test.

“Inspection mentality” is a morale killer. This is the practice of focusing solely on the next inspection. While many ships gear their efforts toward

doing well on the next inspection, on some ships this inspection mentality is so strong they refer to “ORSE patrols” and “TRE patrols.” The Operational Reactor Safeguards Examination (ORSE) is a propulsion plant exam, and so they run predominantly engineering drills. The Tactical Readiness Evaluation (TRE) involves challenging navigation drills as well as shooting missiles and torpedoes, and so they run predominantly forward drills. On *Santa Fe*, doing well on inspections was going to be the natural outcome of being excellent, not the goal. Operational and tactical excellence and preparedness for service to the country were what mattered. If we were excellent and prepared, the drills and inspections would take care of themselves.

We were about to do a tactical inspection, so it was natural that the weapons officer (Weps), Lieutenant Dave Adams, had packed the schedule with weapons and tactical training. The engineer (Eng), Lieutenant Commander Rick Panlilio, wanted to do this engineering drill, and that seemed like a good idea to me because we needed to train both ends of the ship: the tactical end and the propulsion end. I’m glad I agreed to include such a drill because I learned a lesson of profound significance both to me and to the future of *Santa Fe*.

The drill was simple. The engineer would shut the reactor down with a simulated fault. The engineering department would troubleshoot to locate the problem, conduct the necessary repairs, and restart the reactor. While the reactor was shut down, we would have to shift propulsion from the large steam-powered main engines to a much smaller electric propulsion motor, called the EPM. The EPM can power the ship only at slow speed, but it’s enough to get you home if the reactor is out of commission.

We set up for the drill. I was in the control room in the forward part of the submarine observing the officer of the deck and the ship control watch standers. In the engine room, Rick and his drill team set up and had started the drill by scrambling (shutting down) the reactor.

The OOD was my senior department head, Lieutenant Commander Bill Greene, and he was doing all the right things. We had shifted propulsion from the main engines to an auxiliary electric motor, the EPM, to turn the propeller. The ship was coming shallow in order to use its diesel engine to provide electrical power and keep the battery charged until the reactor was restarted. During the long troubleshooting period while the nuclear electronics technicians were isolating the fault, I started to get bored. I fiddled

with my flashlight, turning it on and off. Things were going too smoothly. I couldn't let the crew think their new captain was easy!

I nudged Bill and suggested we increase speed from "ahead one third" to "ahead two thirds" on the EPM to give the nuclear-trained enlisted men (nukes) more to worry about. This would significantly increase the rate of battery discharge and put pressure on the troubleshooters to find and correct the fault quickly. At "ahead two thirds," there is a near-continuous click-click-click on the battery amp-hour meter. An audible reminder that time is running out, it's physically unnerving!

"Ahead two thirds," he ordered.

Nothing happened.

The helmsman should have reached over and rung up ahead two thirds. Instead, I could see him squirming in his chair. No one said anything, and several awkward seconds passed. Astutely noting that the order hadn't been carried out, I asked the helmsman what was going on. He was facing his panel but reported over his shoulder, "Captain, there is no ahead two thirds on the EPM!"

Now, here's my excuse. As I've mentioned in an earlier chapter, I had not been on this class submarine before, and every ship I had been on previously had one third and two thirds on the EPM. I'm 100 percent sure that somewhere in being trained for my new submarine this fact had been covered, but it didn't stick amid the myriad technical details. I'd fallen back on what I'd known before.

I applauded the helmsman and grabbed Bill. In the corner of the control room, I asked him if he knew there was no ahead two thirds on the EPM.

"Yes, Captain, I did."

"Well, why did you order it?" I asked, astounded.

"Because you told me to."

"What?"

"I thought you'd learned something secret at PCO school that they only tell the COs about."

He was being perfectly honest. By giving that order, I took the crew right back to the top-down, command-and-control leadership model. That my most senior, experienced OOD would repeat it was a giant wake-up call about the perils of that model for something as complicated as a submarine. What happens in a top-down culture when the leader is wrong? Everyone goes over

the cliff. I vowed henceforth never to give an order, any order. I would let this be a lesson to myself to keep my mouth shut.

This incident brought to mind being chided as an OOD on my first submarine, the USS *Sunfish*, when I asked the captain for permission. “Just tell me what you are going to do!” he exclaimed. Thereafter, I started saying, “Captain, I intend to . . .” and he encouraged it.

That’s what we decided to do on *Santa Fe*. It wasn’t just when you were on watch, and it wasn’t just for officers. It started filtering through the crew and permeating the way we did business. For my part, I would avoid giving orders. Officers would state their intentions with “I intend to . . .” and I would say, “Very well.” Then each man would execute his plan.

Mechanism: Use “I Intend to . . .” to Turn Passive Followers into Active Leaders

“I INTEND TO . . .” was an incredibly powerful mechanism for CONTROL. Although it may seem like a minor trick of language, we found that it profoundly shifted ownership of the plan to the officers.

“I intend to . . .” didn’t take long to catch on. The officers and crew loved it. I was the one who had a problem with it, ironically. I was worried that someone would say “I intend to . . .” when I was sleeping, and I would not be fully informed or understand what was happening. So, we made a rule that “I intend to . . .” only applied when I was awake. Other than that, it applied to everything.

A year later, I was standing on the bridge of the *Santa Fe* with Dr. Stephen Covey. He’d heard what we were doing and was interested in riding a submarine. Commodore Mark Kenny had been instrumental in arranging it. By this point, the crew had fully embraced our initiatives for control, and “I intend to . . .” was prominently visible. Throughout the day the officers approached me with “I intend to.”

“Captain, I intend to submerge the ship. We are in water we own, water depth has been checked and is four hundred feet, all men are below, the ship is rigged for dive, and I’ve certified my watch team.”

“Very well.”

Dr. Covey was keenly interested in how the ship operated. I gave a copy of his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* to every chief and officer who reported aboard *Santa Fe*. We were applying many of the ideas in his book at an organizational level, to great success.

The Power of Words

The key to your team becoming more proactive rests in the language subordinates and superiors use. Here is a short list of “disempowered phrases” that passive followers use:

- Request permission to . . .
- I would like to . . .
- What should I do about . . .
- Do you think we should . . .
- Could we . . .

Here is a short list of “empowered phrases” that active doers use:

- I intend to . . .
- I plan on . . .
- I will . . .
- We will . . .

Interested readers will want to check out Stephen Covey’s *The 8th Habit* for more ideas about the value of empowering language.

Then we extended the concept.

Frequently, I wouldn’t just say, “Very well.” There would be too many unanswered questions about the safety and appropriateness of the proposed event, so I found myself asking a bunch of questions.

One day I caught myself, and instead of asking the questions I had in mind, I asked the OOD what he thought I was thinking about his “I intend to submerge.”

“Well, Captain, I think you are wondering if it’s safe and appropriate to submerge.”

“Correct. So why don’t you just tell me why you think it is safe and appropriate to submerge. All I’ll need to say is ‘Very well.’”

Thereafter, the goal for the officers would be to give me a sufficiently complete report so that all I had to say was a simple approval. Initially, they would provide some information, but not all. Most of the time, however, they had the answers; they just hadn’t vocalized them. Eventually, the officers outlined their complete thought processes and rationale for what they were about to do.

The benefit from this simple extension was that it caused them to think at the next higher level. The OODs needed to think like the captain, and so on down the chain of command. In effect, by articulating their intentions, the officers and crew were acting their way into the next higher level of command. We had no need of leadership development programs; the way we ran the ship *was* the leadership development program. One of the mechanisms I credit for the significantly disproportionate number of promotions that have been issued among *Santa Fe*’s officers and crew in the past decade was our “I intend to . . .” procedure.

Eventually we turned everything upside down. Instead of one captain giving orders to 134 men, we would have 135 independent, energetic, emotionally committed and engaged men thinking about what we needed to do and ways to do it right. This process turned them into active leaders as opposed to passive followers.

Later, I had the opportunity to talk with a friend of mine who had taught the PCO class. He was frustrated by the inability of too many officers in the training pipeline, who were almost ready to be promoted to commanding officers, to make decisions at the captain level. He said that these officers “came from good ships” but would become paralyzed when it came to decision making. I took issue with his categorizing them as “good ships.” By using that term, he meant ships that didn’t have problems—at least that we knew about. But this had obviously been accomplished using a top-down, leader-follower structure where the captain, when these officers were second in command, made the decisions. Moreover, it didn’t appear that the captain had sufficiently involved or trained his XO.

This shows the degree to which we reward personality-centered leadership structures and accept their limitations. These may have been good ships, in that they avoided problems, but they certainly did not have good leadership.

Why did I say to the navigator that he should go ahead two thirds on the EPM? Being the captain of a nuclear-powered submarine can be a tremendous rush. You give orders, people jump, the reactor goes to higher power, the submarine surges through the water. You want more, you give more orders, and you become more controlling. It has a seductive pull on the leaders, but it is debilitating and energy sapping for the followers.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What causes us to take control when we should be giving control?
- Can you recall a recent incident where your subordinate followed your order because he or she thought you had learned secret information “for executives only”?
- What would be the most challenging obstacle to implementing “I intend to . . .” in your place of business?
- Could your mid-level managers think through and defend their plan of action for the company’s next big project?