

Leadership and the Sea



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For as long as man has recorded history, he has known about the strong link that exists between the sea and the art and practice of leadership. At the macro level, Ancient civilizations including the Egyptians, Greeks, Phoenicians and Romans all appreciated the importance of maintaining a strong maritime culture. This allowed them to strengthen and expand their empires through trade and war. The Ancients were followed by European nations who perfected global expansion through the use of naval power. At the micro level, all of the above cultures also understood the value of the maritime experience as an effective proving ground for future leaders. Read Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* or anything by Herman Melville or Joseph Conrad and you'll get a better understanding of how the sea experience can transform young adolescents into fully formed adults. Even today, many military organizations around the world, including the United States Coast Guard, still use tall ships to train their young officers despite the fact that there hasn't been a battle fought under sail for 150 years. The experience of going to sea teaches leadership lessons that can't be learned in the classroom.

There are lots of characteristics shared by maritime professionals and great leaders so let's take a look at a few.

- **Preparation** Professional mariners must be well prepared before embarking on a voyage; not only is voyage planning good practice, it's explicitly written into the STCW code. Great leaders also spend considerable time, effort and resources to plan and prepare their organizations for the future.
- **Clear Communication** It's essential aboard ship that communication is clear and concise. When the captain gives a command, the helmsman repeats it. Great leaders spend a lot of time meeting and communicating with their stakeholders. They have to create and articulate a vision that everyone can understand and follow.
- **Vigilance** Again as a result of good practice and regulation, professional mariners have to be forever vigilant. Rule 5 is one of maritime's golden rules: Every vessel shall at all times maintain a proper look-out by sight and hear-

ing as well as by all available means appropriate in the prevailing circumstances and conditions so as to make a full appraisal of the situation and of the risk of collision. There is never a good excuse for not posting a proper look out. Great leaders are also always searching the horizon for dangers from which to protect their organizations and opportunities to seize.

- **Adaptability** Anyone who has gone to sea knows that despite the best planning and the sharpest lookout, things can suddenly change and you can find yourself sailing through a whole different set of circumstances. Great leaders know this too and, therefore, they must be flexible and adaptable. Deviation from the plan is often necessary to take advantage of an opportunity or, conversely, survive.
- **Teamwork** Anyone who has gone to sea also knows that the most important person on the vessel is the cook. Okay, I'm trying to make a point that the captain cannot accomplish the mission alone. While he is the ultimate authority onboard, he has to rely on the competency and support of his officers and crew. Great leaders also understand and respect what their employees bring to the organization. They create an environment in which employees contributions become more than the sum of their parts.
- **Confidence and optimism** Only a fool would undertake a voyage for which he did not maintain complete confidence and unbridled optimism about its success. The same can be said of great leaders. I believe that this is the most important shared characteristic between professional mariners and great leaders. Human emotions are contagious and as CBC broadcaster Lister Sinclair once said, "A frightened captain makes a frightened crew." Great leaders understand that they must be confident in their words and deeds; anything short of this will cause followers to waver and the venture to be threatened.

While there's a lot to learn about leadership from the sea, there's also a lot those at sea can learn from the best practices of leadership. One of my favorite leadership quotes comes from a speech that President John F. Kennedy was to deliver on the day he was assassinated. "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other." Whether you are the CEO of a fortune 500 company or a green deckhand on a Mississippi River towboat, in today's dynamic and challenging world, you should be constantly working on improving and enhancing your professional and personal leadership skills.