

Taking command: the crew is only as good as the captain

[Business](#), [Organization](#)



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This short story describes the initial challenge I faced as I prepared to assume command of USS Montpelier, an improved. I spent 17 years in the submarine force preparing for this moment, serving under leaders along the way who ranged in ability from outstanding to poor. I had learned much. Now was my opportunity to apply all I had learned about leadership through practical experience and study. This was a position of tremendous responsibility, accountability and autonomy. Lessons I had learned about teamwork, about communicating a vision, and about compassion and execution in a challenging environment would prove invaluable.

As my story begins, I am en route to Brest, France, to meet my new ship and ride her home as she completes a six-month overseas deployment. I would

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observe the ship for 30 days, and then relieve the commanding officer. An early challenge presented me an excellent opportunity to affect a dramatic organizational change .

Brest, France

I stood alone on a windswept quay on a cold, gray December day on the Atlantic coast of France, taking a second to gather my thoughts. After a long series of flights from Norfolk, Virginia, I wanted a cup of coffee, breakfast, and a hot shower. I made my way to the boat and presented my military ID and ship orders to the petty officer of the deck, who stands watch on top of the submarine hull and controls access. He called down to the duty officer, requesting permission to bring me onboard. I thought surely the duty officer would appear to greet me, but he sent a junior sailor to escort me down to the executive officer's stateroom.

In the stateroom, I found an accordion folder on my rack (bed) labeled " CO Turnover." It contained no note, no welcome and no explanation, only checklists for me to use during my turnover. A brief walk around confirmed my first impression. This was a cold, impersonal ship. I wondered what I had gotten myself into but soon remembered that every ship reflects the personality of its commanding officer. In a little over a month, *Montpelier* would begin to reflect mine.

Before I left for France, my new boss, the commander of our submarine squadron (the commodore), had provided me his brief assessment of the ship. The ship was strong in engineering and basic skills, but was not

performing to its operational potential. It wasn't so much due to making mistakes as it was due to an unwillingness to take prudent risks to optimize operational opportunities. Even in peacetime, submarine command requires a constant assessment of risk versus gain. While the price of an error can be extremely high, an overly conservative approach means that the crew doesn't accomplish all it can with the ship, and that the leadership doesn't teach the crew to operate under the most challenging conditions. *Montpelier* had received below-average grades in the execution of approach and attack against other ships, as well as Tomahawk missile strike launches. The leadership team did not work well together, and this discord resulted in fractured, disjointed *fire control parties* (the teams responsible for targeting enemy ships with torpedoes and planning strike missions).

Atlantic transit

Riding the ship during its voyage home provided me the opportunity to see the crew in action for a few days, before they stood down for 30 days, the rest period that follows a six-month deployment. I had to observe as much as possible in order to identify the operational and leadership issues, determine their underlying causes and formulate my plan of attack. Individual crew members were impressive. They were very knowledgeable and disciplined, and they executed their particular responsibilities well, but these individual efforts failed to translate into outstanding operational results from the ship as a whole. Lacking was the ability to execute complex operations requiring teamwork, coordination and integration.

Periscope-depth excursions were one example. When proceeding to periscope depth, a submarine travels from a deep depth to one near the surface, in order to raise its periscope and gather information. This maneuver allows us to conduct external communications and to fix our navigational position. The exercise, conducted several times a day when the ship is at sea, is considered the bread and butter of the submarine force. Extensive coordination among crew members from different divisions is crucial. Failure could result in catastrophe, as evidenced by the , in February of 2001. *Montpelier* wasn't unsafe, but the maneuver's progression wasn't well coordinated, resulting in an inefficient process that required excessive command level oversight.

Pervasive anxiety

Why was individual competence failing to translate into organizational success? To solve the problem, I needed to understand the cause. I observed how the team hesitated when faced with decisions. It presented problems without proposing solutions. The members were habituated to simply having the captain tell them what to do. It was easier and safer. The officers had grown timid, unaccustomed to independent thinking. They simply weren't having any fun. A sense of anxiety pervaded the ship.

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As a junior officer years before, I had learned the hard way that fear is not an effective motivator. You cannot lead an organization to its full potential through fear. The current environment stifled initiative and innovation, and

slowed things down. On a ship, as in many organizations, there are thousands of decisions every day. If they all funnel through one person, nothing is going to happen quickly -- a fatal flaw for a dynamic organization. A hundred and forty people collaborating toward a common goal are more effective than one man can ever be, no matter how smart.

My discussions with some of the chief petty officers (front line supervisors) revealed underlying resentment between officers and crew. On a submarine, officers are responsible for the tactical employment of the ship, shooting weapons and gathering intelligence, the things that win battles and defeat adversaries. (Think of that as comparable to management's responsibility to attain profitability.) Meanwhile, the crew maintains and operates the equipment. The crew felt that the officers were letting them down. They were working extremely hard to maintain and operate the ship, but the bottom line results did not reflect their effort. If the ship couldn't fight and win in battle, why should they continue to invest so much sweat into it?

A significant immediate challenge

USS *Montpelier* was scheduled for its annual torpedo proficiency examination less than 20 days after I took command, when I would be taking the crew into simulated combat against other submarines. However, the change in command would occur immediately *after* the crew rested for 30 days. Thirty days off for a submarine crew is a lifetime. Operational skills are perishable; it would take a concerted effort just to get everyone adjusted upon their

return. But merely getting back up to speed wasn't good enough -- we needed to be better than ever before.

I knew this first challenge would set the tone for my command tour. It also presented a tremendous opportunity to bond the officers and crew together, thereby changing the ship's organizational culture and eliminating the underlying tension. A submarine crew wants one thing more than any other from its commanding officer: a leader who can take them into battle and win. This validates the daily effort they make to maintain and operate the ship, the sacrifice they endure during six-month deployments, and the loneliness they experience, standing duty in port when they cannot go home at night to see their families.

Sure, they want a positive leader who genuinely cares about them. However, even that takes a backseat to their desire to go to sea with a warrior. I was determined to be both. I knew it was possible. We are often conditioned to think that we have to choose between two conflicting approaches. To be loved or respected, to work hard or have fun, to get quality or to pay a low cost. In reality, this choice is often an illusion. Goals that, on the surface, seem to be in conflict can actually reinforce one another. It's just a matter of dismissing the either/or mentality, and viewing the problem from a different perspective.

Norfolk, Virginia

I needed to build a team, and I needed to do it fast. I needed to do it without sacrificing positive leadership merely to obtain short-term results. I thought

carefully about my priorities and how I would proceed. Performing well during the torpedo exercise was important, both to me and to the ship's reputation. Building a positive relationship with my team was vital in the long run and consistent with my most deeply held values as a leader. I wouldn't compromise my principles to achieve immediate success. If my assessment of the untapped potential of *Montpelier*'s crew was correct, it wouldn't be an issue, but it was important to think it through.

The change of command ceremony was on a Friday, followed by a traditional afternoon celebration. On Monday, I pulled my team together, and expressed my philosophy and expectations. Conducting an approach and attack against another submarine is like conducting an orchestra. The commanding officer has to unite all of his instruments to respond flawlessly in a dynamic and unpredictable environment. There are the sonar operators who man the ship's sensors to detect the enemy; the fire control party which work to solve for the target's range, course and speed with limited and often conflicting information; the ship's control party which control our ship's course, speed and depth; the torpedomen who launch and reload weapons; and the crew which keeps the ship quiet and stands ready to react to any emergency. It requires an incredible amount of teamwork and communication. I had seen some of the smartest commanding officers fail because they couldn't build a team to support them -- no one man can do it alone.

I wanted each member of my team to have more than a solid understanding of his own job; I wanted them to understand mine as well. It was important

that they understood what I was thinking so they could anticipate what was needed. They had to see the big picture and how their individual piece fit into it, and to know what their teammates were doing so that they could help one another. If each understood what the other needed and how data fit into the big picture, we could combine the information to quickly agree on a solution.

Blind knife fight

At first, some of the crew could not believe I expected so much more from them. A lot of the work seemed beyond the scope of their job descriptions. Although a few immediately embraced the challenge, many rejected it as “officer stuff,” outside their realm and impossible for them to learn. In fact, they thought I was out of line for even asking. Although my approach made intuitive sense to me, I was not aware of any other ships that trained this way. The crew believed that their problem was just the leadership team. They thought they knew their jobs, and that if the captain and officers knew theirs, everything would be okay. But I wanted more than okay; I wanted them to be the best in the world. Soon, they would want it, too.

I started my training with a passionate presentation on my strategy for approaching and attacking another submarine. I had distilled it down into a few basic axioms that everyone could remember. Quite frankly, my strategy wasn't all that original: It was a personal mix of lessons from earlier experience and established tactical doctrine, tailored to the particular capabilities of our ship. Two submarines in combat are analogous to two blind men having a knife fight in an alley. The strategy is not the complicated

part. You want to be quiet, hear him first, and sneak around to stab him in the back before he knows what hit him. The challenge? He's trying to do the exact same thing. The key to success isn't so much the strategy, therefore, as it is the execution.

Execution requires teamwork. I planned to drive the ship aggressively to a torpedo firing position. This wouldn't optimize us for employing our sonar, or for calculating the target solution. It was important for everyone to understand that we were all sacrificing individual performance for team success. The overall objective was not to achieve any one piece of the sequence perfectly. It was to get the ship into the best firing position with a target solution that was just good enough to kill the other submarine. Period. I had watched too many ships strive to nail down the target parameters, only to lose the initiative and get shot first. We wouldn't make the same mistake.

Crash training begins

I prepared an integrated training program to teach my crew the practical skills they would need. The first step involved fundamental theoretical training: not pie in the sky stuff, but essential qualities they would need to think on their feet. Next were individual skills, followed by basic team training, and then more advanced team scenarios. I had let everyone know that I would give an exam after each phase of our training, and eagerly awaited the results of the first examination to validate my approach. The results were abysmal. I was disappointed and frustrated. I thought I had done a great job preparing them. Why hadn't they responded to my leadership? I soon realized that they didn't believe I was actually going to

hold them to my standards. They weren't accustomed to such high expectations, so they didn't expect to be held accountable.

It was time for a little extramotivation. "On my ship, being on the fire control party is a privilege, not a right. When this ship goes into battle, the best of you will have the opportunity to fight the ship, to take the battle to the enemy. The rest of the crew will await the results of your efforts, standing by for damage control efforts in the event that you fail. The choice is yours: you can work hard and earn a spot on the team, or you can sit around and wait, putting your fate into the hands of your shipmates. The choice is yours."

I taught the material again, and gave them another exam. Performance improved significantly. I continued with classroom presentations. After we had the fundamentals down, we conducted simulated approaches and attacks as a team. We weren't going to have any time at sea against an actual submarine before our evaluation, so we would have to make do with simulators. We critiqued each approach thoroughly. I let the crew evaluate themselves first, adding my comments last. I wanted them to learn to identify their own mistakes. Most junior sailors weren't used to speaking with the captain, and it took some time to build trust so that they felt comfortable admitting an error. Eventually, I wanted to create an environment where they not only owned up to their own shortcomings, but also had the courage to point out mine. We made a lot of progress fighting in the simulator, but the real test would come on the weapons range. An actual target is significantly more challenging than a simulated one; the noise can't be realistically replicated.

AUTEC Weapons Range, Andros Island, Bahamas

Within minutes of gaining on an “ enemy” submarine, we aggressively cut in behind him to assume a firing position. I ordered *firing point procedures* , a direction to the crew to make final preparations to launch a torpedo. I could tell that many were surprised. I had promised that I wouldn’t waste time “ polishing the cannonball,” but no one on the crew expected us to get into position this quickly. I could sense what many were thinking: I might be a loose cannon, a little quick on the trigger in the heat of the battle. On the command, “ Shoot on generated bearing,” our simulated torpedo slid from the tube. The weapon took off, trailing a thin copper strand over which it communicated with the boat. It would travel at high speed for a few minutes, slow down, and then go active by sending out a series of sonar “ pings” to detect and home in on our target. Like clockwork, sonar reported our torpedo slowing, and then beginning its active transmissions. “ Detect, detect, acquired. Own ship’s unit is in terminal homing,” our weapons operator reported. From shore, the AUTEC weapons range officer had been monitoring our exercise. “ Bull’s-eye, Bull’s-eye, Bull’s-eye,” he announced over the underwater telephone. The crew cheered. The next two shots proceeded like the first. When we still had three more weapons to shoot, the commodore pulled me aside. “ Captain, I’ve seen enough. Why don’t you let the Executive Officer and Department Heads take the remaining shots,” he suggested.

Before wrapping up the exercise, I had one more vital action item to execute: We needed to celebrate our victory. It was important for the crew to

learn the joy of submarining, and a little submarine history as well.

Every graduate of Submarine Prospective Commanding Officer School is presented with a copy of , a book by Medal of Honor winner . Admiral Fluckey's accomplishments on the USS *Barb* were legendary. On the inside cover he had written, “ Now as you mold your Professional Warrior Team -- drive yourself and lead others. Make others feel good about themselves and they will outperform your expectations.” Profound words. I picked up the microphone and told the crew a story from the book. During World War II, submarine skippers were given bourbon to serve as a depth-charge ration, a means to steady the nerves of the crew while the boat was under depth-charge attack. Admiral Fluckey did not agree with this negative reinforcement, and decided to use the bourbon in celebration instead of in fear. Later he learned that his crew much preferred beer to bourbon, so, against Navy regulations, he brought beer onboard. After the *Barb* sunk an enemy ship, the crew would *splice the main brace* -- open up the bar. The cooks would bake a cake with a replica of each ship that *Barb* sent to the bottom. I then ordered the supply officer to splice the main brace. He and the cooks, who were in on my secret, served the crew pizza and non-alcoholic beer. I promised that if we ever shot real weapons we would celebrate with real beer. I took my officers down to the crew's mess for a cake-cutting ceremony. The room was packed. I could see the excitement, joy and pride on their faces.

An early victory

Splicing the main brace and three-dimensional cakes became a tradition on *Montpelier*, along with excellence. We earned a reputation as the most combat-ready submarine in the Atlantic Fleet, receiving numerous ship and department awards. *Montpelier* was featured on local television news for outstanding performance, morale and retention. After I left, *Montpelier* went on to shoot the first submarine-launched missions during Operation Iraqi Freedom under my relief, Bill Frake.

Our performance on the weapons range was just the first step on a path to excellence, but it was probably the most critical. An early victory is often the most valuable one in terms of affecting organizational change. I didn't learn how to assemble a team to solve a complex problem overnight. Lessons that I learned the hard way during my earlier assignments, whether through my mistakes or those of others, proved invaluable in the evolution of my leadership style and my plan of attack for addressing demanding challenges.