

**Leadership: Tradition in Storytelling**  
*CDR Daniel Rogers*

The sea how beautiful deep and long  
It calls to us with siren song  
It tempts with freedom, a chance to serve  
Independence perhaps, if you have the nerve

With visions of glory youth is quick to imbibe  
We find ourselves just trying to survive  
The rigors all military members must know  
But then, down to the ships we go

The seas majestic  
The skies so blue  
The stars so many  
Then it turns on you

Independence forgotten  
We all grab a line  
Pulling together  
We make it this time

Bonded in danger, in loss, and in pain  
It's no longer the sea that calls us by name  
It's those whom we've served with: crew first, then friends  
And in peace or in wartime, may our blue lines ne'er end

The son of a submariner, I entered the Coast Guard to learn the leadership lessons of a sea service. Like many in our volunteer organizations, I joined for what I could gain from the experience. I planned to go to the Academy, go to sea, go to graduate school and then trade blue water for green pastures. In short, I wasn't a poster child for the concept of service before self. To my shame, I treated service as a means to an end and not as a privilege only offered to some.

Time tempers the passions of youth and I began learning the intent, strategy, and policies of the Coast Guard. Every passing day, year, and tour revealed not a perfect organization, but one worth making a contribution to improve. Like the transition described in the poem, my own self-focus yielded to commitment and an evolution of feeling occurred; "I want to

be in” shifted to “I get to be in”. Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty grew from words I knew to values I esteem, and I’ve become part of something much bigger than me. All of our members need to make a similar transition to maximize the effectiveness of the sea services and none more than our newest members.

Many may have started more mature than I, but leaders of character aren’t just born that way and there’s really no finish line. What follows are three parables to illustrate and provide practical help at the organizational, supervisor, and individual levels. Like most parables, the framework it creates gives a starting point for leadership development.

### The Parable of the Governor

*Leadership in the Sea Services is like a governor who was seeking an advisor. This governor asked one of his trusted officials to prepare for three visits. During each visit, the official was to leave specific identifiable errors in certain areas of his responsibility. Three would-be advisors each conducted a visit to this same official. The first, knowing the governor’s relationship to the official, sang his praises and denied anything was wrong. The second, seeking his own promotion, found an inordinate number of gaps in the official’s performance and asked the governor that he be allowed to replace the official. The third, not wanting to disparage the Governor’s trust (but also desiring to fulfill his own responsibilities), brought questions and concerns.*

Each of these would-be advisors wanted to come to the table and to be asked their thoughts. The first proved respectful. The second proved truthful. But the third balanced respect with truth.

In the sea services, it’s not hard to find a truthful member. Neither is it hard to find a respectful one, but finding one willing to provide both simultaneously is a rare gem, especially if the truth is thoughtful. If perception is reality, then senior leadership needs to employ a cadre of advisors to ensure their perception best reflects the truth.

Truth is important at all levels of organization, but it is most important to senior leaders because they are beholden to organizational realities, not mythologies. Coast Guard leaders must drive improvements mindful of what occurs “behind the curtain”. If Drucker is right and “culture eats strategy for breakfast”, then the obligation of senior leaders is to understand culture as they build strategy. How the organization actually functions must be understood before tinkering under its proverbial hood.

When change is necessary, senior leaders then have to determine whether their role is to push the change or pull it. Pushing change, while fairly common, can create just the “us vs. them” many would seek to avoid. Pulling change allows for negative behaviors to be addressed through positive ones. It removes the finger wagging and replaces it with “walk with me and let me show you how we do it here”. If senior leaders are our organizational drum majors, they must know the tune they are playing and keep a consistent beat.

At the organizational level, leadership is finding people willing to provide truth with respect. It is using these advisors to learn organizational culture, and it is using the positive aspects of culture to fix the negative ones by pulling change instead of pushing it. Once the organizational level is covered, attention can be turned to the supervisor level and the second parable.

### The Parable of the Judge

*Leadership in the Sea Services is like a finding a judge who not only knows the law and upholds it, but judges based upon the intent of the law and not just its letter. This judge still applies the law as written, but not blindly; instead, research supports interpretation.*

Finding the kind of judge described above is not so different from deciding what employees should become supervisors. However, elevation always brings risk, as any cadet or midshipman has witnessed. Seemingly normal peers sometimes undergo metamorphosis when promoted to cadre, and their treatment of subordinates can undermine the goals of the organization they say they serve.

Perhaps moving folks up the ranks creates an expectation of continued promotability attributable to just how capable all our military employees undoubtedly are. Tongue back out of cheek, promotion should be about finding those individuals capable of executing judgment on behalf of the organization. The breadth of responsibility should also match the maturity of the judgment. Yet, what tools can be used to evaluate a judge? The second parable gives us an idea.

The first criterion for the judge is to know the law and uphold it. In the sea services, someone made you a supervisor. If the system has depersonalized this process too far, then it can be easy to lose sight of “who made you judge.” Applying organizational policies can create challenges and all supervisors should expect resistance as they maintain persistence. They also need to own it, regardless of personal opinions. As soon as the XO gets blamed for a change, the supervisor proves his own powerlessness.

The second criterion is to judge based upon the law’s intent. When research is performed each time a policy question emerges, time and application of policy can create intuition that allows a supervisor to begin to understand the intent behind the policy. If intent reveals change as warranted, policy must still be upheld until the change is enacted. Otherwise, policy gets treated as optional and inconsistency across the service becomes the norm. How supervisors apply policy service-wide largely defines organizational culture.

Leaning forward as supervisors through both high accountability and high care removes any arbitrariness. If you would like a quick gauge on your effectiveness, consider the topic of diversity. If you want to improve diversity, promote unity and judge consistently. The most compelling ideals draw the most people, the best jokes consistently receive laughs, and the best stories wow the largest crowds. If only certain kinds of people can succeed in your care, then now you understand why diversity is truly a leadership issue. Recruitment cannot solve our bleeding of certain groups of people at the mid-grade level, and organizational success in this area requires local attention if we are going to succeed at retention.

High accountability means knowing the jobs of those supervised and not allowing progress questions to go unanswered. Many employees treat questions on their performance like bullets from a six-shooter and a cowboy's command to dance. The only way to assuage their fears is to combine high accountability with high care.

High care removes the "reveal" at the end of a performance period; surprises are rarely good when it comes to evaluations. Leadership means having real conversations with employees and assuming they are all worth developing. Let them opt out.

At the supervisor level, leadership is about recognizing "who made you judge," knowing your organization's laws and upholding them. It's about consistently applying that law to understand intent, and it's about leaning forward as supervisors by providing both high accountability and high care to subordinates. Now that the supervisor level has been considered, it's time to turn to individuals and the third parable.

### The Parable of the Rancher

*Leadership in the Sea Services is like a rancher whose friends recommended he replace his horses with four-wheelers to speed up the process of feeding his cattle. Finally accepting their advice, he bought the four-wheelers. After only 2 weeks, he returned the four-wheelers and put his employees back on horses. With the four-wheelers, the employees began rushing through their responsibilities, playing with the machines, and mishandling the cattle. It turned out that partnering with animals to care for animals resulted in better care for both the animals and the people, though it was slower going.*

The concerns of those who go to sea should mirror the rancher's. Character development always goes back to the individual and what expectations they are obliged to meet. It begins with identity and who they are expected to *be*. The rancher wasn't just looking for the job to get done; he needed it done a certain way. He wasn't producing fed cows; he was producing a quality operation through care. Next, responsibilities can be bestowed as

employees *do* their jobs. The rancher gave his employees tools so that what he needed matched with what they received. Finally, individuals need to build upon past success and *pass on* the knowledge and experience they gain. Perhaps, like the rancher, they too will need to evaluate the best way to get the job done when they shift from day workers to owners.

### *Be*

In the military, a minimum standard has been established for character—we call it military justice—and those who transgress this floor of behavior get to experience the green tablecloth of judicial or non-judicial proceedings. On the positive side, there are also minimum standards for joining the service and not everyone makes the team. Individuals should feel pride for making the team and wear the colors well.

### *Do*

Once individuals know what team they are playing for, they can focus on knowing their part and playing it well. The position they get to play is now for the benefit of the whole team. Would that they would all knock it out of the park! Here, performance evaluations reflect past employee contributions and document how the organization may potentially use individuals in the future. Yet, value to the organization is a double-edged sword. So many say they want to be valued in their service, but to be valued is to be used. When your services are required, how will you respond?

### *Pass It On*

Knowledge may be power, but knowledge broadly applied is capability. In our two hundred plus year organizations, we stand on the shoulders of giants. Yet, which way are we reaching—up for the distant passing cloud or down to lift the next generation? Every military member has a shelf life. Each should feel compelled to pass on the things they do well before they expire. Only then can individuals be proud of the people who succeed

them. The greatest risk in any sea service is the hoarding of knowledge where losing people would mean losing capability.

At the individual level, leadership begins with identity and who we are expected to be. It then turns to doing the work and creating value for the service. Finally, leadership becomes a human pyramid as organizational capability grows with each generation. With the three parables now complete, one other topic needs consideration before finishing this leadership discussion.

### Working with Peers

So often, leadership means looking up or down with little consideration given for those that accompany us as peers on the journey. However, peers are critical at the organizational, supervisor, and individual levels. At the organizational level, senior leaders must work in concert to build strategy that considers culture. Unilateral decisions must be rare to effectually pull change in organizations. Supervisors, at their level, need one another to understand and consistently apply policy. Individuals also need one another to recognize their role as part of something bigger.

Competition in performance might prove edifying if mutually beneficial gains could potentially result. Competition in identity is misguided and toxic. In the Coast Guard, identity competition is the enemy within, and covetousness its very close twin. To want to be like the best without undermining them is the ideal. If peers cannot celebrate one another's successes and, instead, only see them as personal setbacks in the race to the top, then most of the wisdom of the parables above will fall flat. Organizational improvements will be undermined for personal gain. Supervisor responsibilities will be more about the supervisor than the responsibility, and individual identity will supersede our ability to call ourselves Sailors, Marines, and Coasties.

BM1 Bernie Webber's actions on the night of February 18, 1952 embodied Coast Guard leadership at its best. After the *Pendleton* (a tanker) broke in half during a severe

Nor'easter accompanied by freezing horizontal snow off the coast of Massachusetts, Webber used the 90 horsepower gas engine powering the 36 foot motor lifeboat to maneuver under the stern of the vessel and, with his crew of volunteers, saved 32 of the 33 crewmen in the stern section of the ship as they descended a Jacobs ladder. All this was done 10 miles offshore in 60 foot seas, 40-50 knots of wind, with a windshield broken, and compass knocked from its mount while crossing the bar. The waves were so large and the rolling of the boat so severe that the engine would occasionally die, forcing the engineer to climb into the engine compartment to restart it. After retrieving the passengers, this "self-bailing" boat became "self-filling" with all the extra weight, which left the survivors outside the survivors' cabin knee deep in water. They made it back, and the heroism displayed that night by Webber carried over once the seas were calm. When offered the Gold Lifesaving Medal for the rescue, he declined when he learned that his crew would only receive a Silver one. This humility was rewarded and each of the crew of four received the Gold Lifesaving Medal for their efforts.<sup>1</sup>

Stories powerfully convey wisdom, stimulate thought, and encourage memory. We are privileged to be part of organizations with no shortage of stories. The challenge for each of us is to first know those stories, then embody the best of what they teach. Then we can inform future culture using past success and respect for our history. By knowing our origins, we better understand what led to today's policies and whose shoulders we stand upon. Can you believe that this is who we get to be? Each of us gets to play a part; may our contributions match our commitment!

## Bio

CDR Daniel Rogers is an active duty Coast Guard officer assigned as Chief of Logistics and Commanding Officer of Military Personnel at Sector Boston. A professional engineer, he now spends the majority of his time engaging human resources.

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<sup>1</sup> Captain W. Russell Webster, USCG (December 2001) The Pendleton Rescue. *Naval Institute Proceedings* (Vol 127, pp. 66-69).