

39. The Critical Turn (4:02)

The experience that I wanted to share with you came very early in my commissioned career. My assignment out of the Academy was to the Coast Guard Cutter Absecon as a deck watch officer and so off I went.

One of our earliest patrols in February of 1965 was Ocean Station Bravo and, as you can imagine, Ocean Station Bravo in the winter months is not an enormously pleasant place to be. We were in the middle of the classic plow into it for as long as it takes to get to one end of the Ocean Station assignment and then turn around and ride the waves all the way back to the other end, turn around and do it again and turn around and do it again.

So we were on the up bound into the seas and I'm talking about 35 to 40 foot seas. There were three different systems as I recall at the time and it was a terribly nightmarish, topsy-turvy kind of a sea going opportunity to excel at and, as you can imagine, the critical time for those kind of operations is the turn when you're plowing into those 40-foot seas and have to make the turn 180 degrees to go back the other way.

So I was on the mid-watch and on one occasion Captain Jack Forster was in the CO's chair on the bridge - had been there literally for three or four days which is leadership experience number one - so as it came time for me to make the turn on that mid-watch, I had myself glued to the porthole in the front of the bridge waiting for the timing necessary to accelerate the outboard shaft on the twin screw WAMP that we were riding.

I tried to time the sea waves, perfectly, gave the rudder command, reached my hand back on the engine order enunciator to accelerate the outboard shaft and help us push through the turn when in the dark of the bridge after being on that bridge for about four days Jack Forrester's hand came down on the top of mine, picked it up and put it over on the correct engine order enunciator.

I was about to complete the rudder command by accelerating the inboard shaft as opposed to the outboard shaft and with not a single word - no one on the bridge throughout this whole episode knew anything about what was going on other than the Captain and myself - he picked up my hand, put it over on the correct engine order telegraph and gave me a little nudge with it to accelerate that correct outboard engine and push us through this very very difficult and dangerous turn in those 40 or 45 foot seas.

So for me that day I learned an awful lot about leadership. I learned about the responsibilities of command for the safety and well-being of the ship and the crew on board and I learned even more about the things that could happen or could go wrong if, in fact, you didn't do what you were responsible to do first of all, trained to do second of all and wanted to do for the well-being of the ship and the crew.

One of the first vivid leadership lessons I learned as a young officer. I've told that story so as to impart the leadership lesson I received from Captain Jack Forrester to those that I would be in a

mentoring position to help them gain confidence in themselves on one hand but to also gain a sense of responsibility when placed in leadership positions.

Related Primary Leadership Principles

Accountability	Authority of Position
Character	Continual Learning
Courage	Decision-Making
Drive to Achieve	Example
Feedback	Field Presence
Followership	Military Core Values
Mission	Political Savvy
Stress	Responsibility
Training	Stress
Training	