

More on Leadership

This is an interesting leadership article that I clipped out of the US Naval Institute's Proceedings magazine. Even though it is a Navy article, it equally applies to Masonic officers coming up the line and to those that would aspire to be one. Take the time to read through this one and heed the points that are called out in this advisory on how to be a good (and effective) leader.

Remember, in the long run it is not your job to necessarily do everything – rather it is for you to know how to do it and to train and motivate your people to do it. That is leadership.

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I was a young ensign at my first command, sitting in the office of one of our department heads for a one-on-one meeting. It was a bit intimidating. I had not yet done much in my career, and this lieutenant commander was nearing retirement. He was prior-enlisted and both a qualified surface warfare officer and submarine warfare officer who had been around the world. I was eager to learn all I could from him. He only told me one thing: “Ensign Moss, always learn your boss’ job and then try to do it for them. Do that, and you will always be successful.”

The conversation stuck with me. Like all the best rules, it is simple but with profound implications:

- If you are not succeeding at your job, neither is your boss. Start by excelling at your own responsibilities.
- To do your boss’ job, you must learn it. That means preparing yourself for the next level of responsibility and leadership.
- There is no better way to learn effective leadership skills than when trying to lead up and convince your boss to go along with your plans. You cannot rely on positional authority to carry you through; your skills, planning, and charisma must do the job.
- If you are doing your boss’ job for them, they become freer to look “up and out” themselves and provide you and everyone else in the command a better strategic outlook. In other words, you are helping your boss do their boss’ job too. Everyone benefits when this trickles all the way up the chain.
- Focusing on your boss’s job prevents you from micromanaging and aids in developing those you lead.
- You probably have better ground-truth data than your boss. That can help you make better and quicker decisions. So do it, inform them, and happily let them overrule you if their broader perspective dictates.

Be Excellent at Your Own Job

We all love leading people who are self-starters and great at their jobs. You never have to worry about them, and they handle problems before they even reach you. You can give them a task and walk away knowing it will happen. Be that person for your boss.

I saw this clearly demonstrated in my first division. There were two fresh ensigns assigned to my boss. Both were immediately given responsibilities to manage and sent on their way. One was assigned to divisional exam security. They took a few days to thoroughly review the requirements of the assignment, ask questions, and organize a system to conduct it. Then it just happened; we never heard the topic mentioned or thought about it. Exams were just in the safe on exam day—until the day another division came under command investigation for not meeting requirements and we were ordered to audit our exam materials. Stress was briefly very high for us junior officers (JOs), but we passed with flying colors thanks to our ensign. As a result, they were quickly given more trust and responsibility; more ability to dictate the division's future, and later, the command's.

The second ensign was tasked with divisional training. They would come in occasionally, give a monotone report and ask everyone to complete their training, and then move on. Before long, our division officer was checking on them daily and counseling them at every mistake. They never earned any trust and were never taken seriously enough to have any impact.

To lead up, you must first be trusted and good at your own job.

Learn Your Bosses Job

To constantly grow into roles of higher responsibility is fundamental to every military officer's career. The next job will be more demanding than the one before, and officers must either accept that challenge or call time on their career. Yet, we cannot simply accept the challenge and step into a new role unprepared. It is incumbent on each officer to be ready before it arrives. On the job training has its place, but we cannot make sailors and soldiers pay for avoidable mistakes.

To prepare, learn your boss' job and do it. You get to see how they handle the challenges and then give it a shot yourself. They are still the boss you still must run everything by them and give them a chance to correct or overrule you. It is the perfect way to practice your next level of responsibility while having the full backup of someone with more experience and every reason to help you succeed.

What if your boss does not want you to do any part of his or her job? You now have a perfect opportunity to practice your own leadership skills and convince them otherwise.

Perfect Your Leadership Skills

Leadership is a skill. It takes time and practice to get better, as we all know. It is true that you can and should be practicing those skills with your people daily, but JOs have a bit of a cheat code. We have positional authority and the respect of our rank, even when we fall short. This often can mask some of our shortcomings and leave us blinded to them.

A good way to get around this is to try out your leadership skills on those above you—where they, not you, have the cheat code. When you are trying to lead someone with authority over you, you must have a good plan. You must have a good rationale. You must present your plan in a convincing manner. Any lack in your skills will likely be highlighted, and, conversely, when you succeed you will know it was because you lead effectively.

‘Up and Out’

An important part of leadership is steering the ship, deciding what should be done. No leaders can do this effectively if they are not looking “up and out” This simply means that they are looking outside of their own area of responsibility and observing what is happening around them. It is looking for the reefs and sandbars, the constant bearing/decreasing range ships, and the storms on the horizon. A leader cannot do this if they are constantly focused internally and only managing their own people and day-to-day tasks.

Failing to let leaders step back and survey the external landscape leads to situations in which the entire organization may be doing their jobs perfectly and still find themselves facing disaster. A great example of this was pointed out by then-Marine Corps Major Brian Kerg in his 2022 *Proceedings* essay “[Leading Through Defeat](#).” Nothing is worse on the deck plates than failing while doing the job perfectly; that is exactly where we are likely to find ourselves without an up-and-out viewpoint from our bosses.

Knowing *how* to do it does not help if the boss does not know *what* to do.

Downfalls of Micromanagement

That conversation with the department head who advised me to do my boss’ job was one of the few work conversations we ever had. He practiced his own advice and spent most of his time working with senior officers, passing his instructions and guidance to his direct reports and trusting them to do their jobs. He was effective and everyone loved him.

At the same command, we had another department head who was quite the opposite. He wandered through divisional spaces daily, frequently popped into workrooms to check on everyone, and constantly corrected sailors and JOs alike if he disagreed with how they approached their work. Nobody liked him. Much worse, nobody respected him. Likewise, departmental results declined because most of his subordinates felt they could only do things he had told them to and in the way he said to. In hindsight, I can see he was truly trying to do his job well. His efforts were counterproductive, though, and we all gave a sigh of relief when he transferred to another command.

Leading up helps avoid this micromanaging pitfall. The flip side of trying to do your boss’ job is that you do not have time to be constantly checking how your subordinates are doing theirs. You must train and organize your people and then let them take responsibility and execute. This does not abrogate your responsibility for what they do, it simply means that you must trust them. If you do not trust them, then it is your responsibility to train them until you do.

Help Make Informed Decisions

Ground truth lies at the ground level. You will almost always be closer to it than your boss. That does not mean your boss cannot make better decisions than you. They have the advantage of a broader view of how all the pieces connect. It does mean their decisions are likely to be either more disconnected from reality or slower as they must first track down the data. Being closer to the data to begin with, you can make what you think is the best-informed decision. Then, of course, you run it by your boss with your reasoning.

Either you have just done their job for them by making a good and timely call, or you brought your best data and reasoning to the table and helped them make a fully informed choice. Either way, it is a win-win.

Another side benefit is that you are practicing making the best decision you can with the data available to you, in a time and place in which you can afford to be wrong because ultimately it is your boss' decision and they will check you. Right or wrong, you get better at no expense to anything—except perhaps your ego.

All of this was essentially summarized by retired Navy Vice Admiral Kenneth Malley in his Ten Rules: “No matter what you think of your boss (or customer), if he or she does not end up being a hero, neither do you.” Let us go be heroes. It is what we signed up for, after all.