

Leaders, learning and lighthouses

My command pod is a special space. In my oversized swivel rocker recliner, across from a massive computer screen, I can spin and summon memories from well-adorned walls and crannies and cubbies of my eclectic study. I often contemplate the hard-earned lessons enshrined by my surroundings.

Swinging my "captain's turret," I canvass military medals, baby shoes, patient's mementos and medical parchments. Turning again, I spy my malleable medic Gumby doctor doll in military regalia holding a dollar from my first paying "gig." Swiveling back, I scan a heart-stealing collection of cards from Madame P chronicling our history; each one is laser-love accurate and interspersed with rows of my friends, my books. Many are about managing and leading.

Recent dealings with some city hall folks fixed my gaze to my favorite leadership teaching tool. It's a replica of the massive aircraft carrier U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln with a bone marrow biopsy needle for an anchor. It is at sea in the silicon waves of a tiny sand box, dead reckoned at a toy lighthouse anchored in craggy, boulder strewn cardboard cliffs.

When it was my turn to mentor and massage managers into leaders, I took the tool along. We all know the joke about the massive military vessel in a tempest tossed sea increasingly demanding that



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some runt on the radar in its path give way. The allegory ends with a calm-toned, unimpressed lighthouse keeper informing the arrogant admiral at the helm of the carrier that the choice of changing course or foundering was his.

Early in my military career, I stupidly visited administrivia land. I requested a new type of bone marrow biopsy needle "through channels." By the time Methuselah's grandchildren died, unashamedly stamped by 11 administrators and after a move to a new medical center, the request found its way back to me. It was in pristine condition. An attached note said, "Dear captain, (I was, now a colonel), the item is discontinued. Reaccomplish with update." It was signed by a seasoned, notorious administrator.

Those who merely manage may lose sight of the horizon and are at risk of crashing the entire enterprise down around the boulders of their boorish insistence on "proper procedures" to maintain their ship of state. Think of it as losing sight of the forest for the trees.

Leaders do not resent those runts on the radar screen of reason and reckoning. Rather, they long to hear those "blips," knowing they are anything but blunders. Leaders understand that little lighthouses of logic can illuminate ways to steer even the most massive of ships on the roughest seas and frankly may be the best

way to fair seas, following winds and new horizons.

Leaders must embrace certain fears: The fear of only managing when leading is needed, the fear of falling into the sand trap of administrivia and creativity killing "proper procedures," the fear behind the belief that the talent they need to surround themselves with must walk, talk and squawk alike and the misguided fear that if a subordinate is not polished, they cannot shine.

As we sail our ships in the sandbox of life, do not merely manage by counting the grains, repeatedly sorting and arranging and fearing that the winds of creativity will scatter a world made of shifting sands. Leaders want those winds. Leaders sail across those sands welcoming and building castles with grains of all sizes.

So here is a wish for those in city government who manage when they should lead. Consider the admiral before the carrier under your command crashes and all is lost. In short, never ostracize through arrogance or insecurity, the talented but unpolished of those who serve you. Fertilize them. They may in fact be your salvation. They are often lighthouses twinkling away against the darkness of your oppressive need to be in control.

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