



*The
Learning
Leader*

*A New Perspective
On Coast Guard
Leadership Culture*



The Learning Leader: A New Perspective on Coast Guard Leadership Culture

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The Coast Guard is facing a leadership dilemma. It has enjoyed, and deserved, the reputation as a world leader across its many programs, from Search and Rescue and Law Enforcement to Marine Environmental Response. *Semper Paratus* is ingrained in Coast Guard culture and has led to an organization that tries to answer the call regardless of increasing stress placed on its personnel and systems. The Coast Guard has an organizational culture that has generated and thrived on acts of heroism. How can this organization both sustain its commitment to readiness and ensure its future success in the face of increasing pressures and challenges? By grooming the next generation of strategic thinkers now. It is up to us to break the syndrome of crisis management that has begun to consume such a fast paced, intensive organization that prepares for and responds to national emergencies.

In a constantly changing environment, strategic thinking is a critical skill required for leaders to be able to keep pace and make the best decisions. However, current conditions foster a constant "crisis management" mode of operating that is not necessarily appropriate for decisions that foster long-term organizational health. That is, the Coast Guard working environment has evolved into one of daily crisis management at all levels. This mode has a tendency to compromise the holistic perspective required by strategic decision makers, and affects our long-term ability to respond to national crises.

A day in the life of an average mid-grade officer consists of focusing on short-term goals and resolving the crisis of the day, with little time devoted to truly considering the future of the mission and what it will take to get there. Many important decisions that may have long-term effects are made quickly in order to meet immediate deadlines. In fact, in *The Politics of Crisis Management, Public Leadership Under Pressure* (2005), the authors cite research that shows that pressure, such as that created in response to managing a

crisis, causes individuals to “focus on the short-term and neglect longer-term considerations, fall back on and rigidly cling to old and deeply rooted behavioral patterns (often forgetting more recent ones), and narrow and deepen their span of attention.”

In 2008, the Coast Guard Office of Leadership and Development initiated a Strategic Needs Assessment to assess leadership competencies possessed by its mid-grade officers. The resulting Mid-Grade Officer Leadership Gap Analysis affirms the need for strategic thinking. When the current state of leadership ability was compared to the optimal state, as set forth in the Coast Guard's 28 leadership competences, significant gaps were identified. Strategic thinking was one of the top four skills noted as sub-optimal. Furthermore, according to interviews of senior officers, the leadership competency of strategic thinking ranked first as the largest existing performance gap.

In 2009, Pearlstein and Bradlee of the *Washington Post* said that the “fiber of organizations is shown during crises...leaders have to execute crisis management flawlessly,” however, “sooner or later, some epidemic will overwhelm the capacity to respond.” In the past, the Coast Guard's traditional leadership and response culture provided a competitive advantage and resulted in a highly successful organization across all of its missions. That culture generated acts of heroism which showcased the organization's success. However, public expectations, global environments, geopolitical landscapes as well as internal reorganization and budgetary restrictions now mandate a change in business as usual and require an improved strategy to maintain the ideal state of readiness and success.

One approach to redirecting the trend of crisis management is to create a culture of *learning leaders*, a culture that nurtures strategic thinking skills throughout the ranks. Acts of heroism are laudable but aren't a sustainable way to ensure future success. It is time for all Coast Guard personnel to understand that daily decisions, even the smallest and seemingly superficial ones, have long-term implications. That is, expedient thinking may solve a problem for the moment but may not serve the organization's longer-term goals.

There is every reason to believe that demands on the Coast Guard will not diminish. So how can we prepare leaders for a continuing climate of crisis management?

Organizations don't make decisions, people do. Since the primary leadership competency of strategic thinking is deeply-rooted in personal conduct, the organization

relies on individuals to make the toughest, best, and most strategic decisions to lead us all in the right direction.

Therefore the Coast Guard must create a culture that generates more strategic thinking among personnel, better strategic thinkers among its leaders, and better strategic planning within the organization. In other words, strategic thinking must be adopted as a core value to guide each person through daily decision-making, especially during times of crisis. That is, we must promote the development of *learning leaders*, people who are committed to continuing education, open to using new tools and the latest technology, and seek the opportunity to acquire knowledge of internal and external forces that impact the organization. There are several concrete ways to create a culture of *learning leaders*:

1. Expand the Coast Guard definition of strategic thinking to include external forces and drivers. In the *U.S. Coast Guard Performance Improvement Guide*, the Coast Guard describes strategic planning as a "process by which leaders clarify their organization's mission, develop a vision, articulate the values, and establish long-, medium-, and short-term goals and strategies." Whereas an academic perspective as set forth in *The Nature of Leadership* defines strategic intent as directing attention to the "external environment within which the organization exists." Consideration of external forces is critical in a constantly changing environment.
2. Promote the use of strategic decision making tools like scenario planning. Scenario planning enables users to map out strategies based on real data to reach long-term goals. It can help individuals think beyond the challenge immediately at hand to weigh decisions in the context of longer-term goals and broader consequences.
3. Incorporate strategic thinking strands into formal leadership education. This is particularly important since it was identified as a top leadership competency shortfall in mid-grade officers, the very people who we are counting on to lead the organization in the future.
4. Emphasize strategic thinking as a core value. Prioritize job assignments and career paths that utilize and foster strategic thinking skills. That is, a job that develops strategic thinkers should also be a job that enhances promotions and career path development.

Joseph Jaworski, author of *Synchronicity* and scenario planner for Shell, describes the world as a fabric of invisible connections; he says that leaders can actually influence change and create paths of opportunity-essentially taking the future into their own hands. It is essential for the Coast Guard to take the future into its own hands, with *learning leaders* as its stewards. *Learning leaders* must be knowledgeable about organizational, national, and global trends and apply that knowledge to their every day decisions. This is how we can break the syndrome of crisis management, which keeps us stuck in the past and drives our ultimate demise as individuals and as an organization. This is how we will drive the response, and not be driven by the response. I charge everyone who reads this article to become a *learning leader*. In doing so, each person will be part of a culture shift that will nurture strategic thinkers who will ensure excellent crisis management and future organizational success.

Leadership Competencies addressed: Strategic Thinking; Self Awareness and Learning; Personal Conduct; External Awareness; Decision Making and Problem Solving