

# The Presence of Leadership



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“One must be present to lead.” A friend and I were discussing leadership challenges as he prepared for his first Command. We were thinking about how to create and maintain a command climate that truly promotes our Core Values, keeps our people safe, and our mission on trackline. In considering some of the Coast Guard’s Class A mishaps, as well as safety and Core Values “near misses” from our own experiences, we identified the need for active, visible leadership as a common factor.

With apologies to Woody Allen, I’m not so sure that half of life is simply showing up, but I do believe that leaders, whether or not in a command position, need to understand their obligation to maintain a *visible* and *active* role in their unit. Standing orders, training, carefully written policies, and appropriate delegation of authority can all contribute to the success of a command, but they are no substitute for actually being present. A passive “open door policy”, no matter how sincere, is not sufficient.

That one must be present to lead seems self evident, but unfortunately, it is an idea that is sometimes overlooked. Administrative duties and the tyranny of the in-box can draw the best of us away from what we know are our true responsibilities. Some individuals make a deliberate choice to delegate and withdraw – as if those two actions go together. Leadership does not afford us this luxury.

A lack of presence creates risks for units and for the service as a whole. In establishing his expectations concerning sexual assault, Admiral Papp recently reminded us that “there are no bystanders in the Coast Guard”. We need to understand that a failure to act, to define a very visible presence on the right side of this issue creates a vacuum which can harbor reprehensible behavior. This same philosophy is equally valid in other areas of leadership. The Coast Guard is a team, and everyone must be present to win.

An active leadership presence does more than help us avoid serious pitfalls, it gives us the opportunity to engage with our crews, establish our intent, and listen to their ideas. While it is not possible to be equally present and active with all members of a command, leaders must be thoughtful in how and when we interact with others. This is the way to identify risk, draw out concerns and suggestions, and reinforce our Core Values.

Listening is an important aspect of maintaining a visible leadership. Most of us, your author included, could stand to improve our listening skills<sup>1</sup>, and leaders need to pay particular attention to what is left unsaid in conversations. Equally important, leaders must watch for individuals or small groups that appear isolated or left out.

While I’m a firm believer in the need for an active leadership presence, there are as many ways to accomplish this as there are leaders in the Coast Guard, and we are *all* leaders. Find a way that suits your background, the people you work with, and the needs of your unit. Start just by getting up from your desk; you know you’ve been there too long as it is.

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<sup>1</sup> Think you are a good listener? Ask your spouse/significant other, or teenager; listen to what they say.