

# **The Skipper: Commanding When a Coach Is Unavailable**

Carl V. Rabstajnek, P.E., M.B.A., Ph.D.



**A Skipper** must command a ship and its crew in fair weather and foul. Off-site consultants cannot guide the vessel when it is underway during a storm. Neither a mentor nor an executive coach is available to advise commanders when a squall hits. On board, only the captain, officers and crew, isolated and alone, are available to navigate a ship in troubled waters.

A ship's captain is illustrative of the full range of talents and skills needed to also effectively run other organizations in both good and in bad times. The diagram illustrates that the skipper's position contains many facets needed for command, which includes: *leadership, management, supervision, and coordination*. These areas embody — but are not limited to — *inspiration, control, direction, and integration of interdependent operations*.

The effective master operates in all four domains and is not focused on a popular leadership or management fad or fashion. The four components cited are complicated and have seemingly unlimited definitions that need to be melded with the captain's personal convictions and style. It is helpful for the skipper's supporting officers and crew to know his or her philosophy to be motivated, controlled, and directed. It is useful to have previously experienced — in training — the benefits of cohesion.

## **Preparation and Training**

A ship's skipper and crew are on a self-contained vehicle and they together must survive, each on their own and joint merits. To endure, it is necessary to plan and train during times of calm for the torrential rains, high seas, and limited visibility that can be expected from time to time while underway. When *all hell breaks loose* is not the time to implement radically new procedures and attempt team building. The learning and relationships must be developed and practiced before the need arises. Preparation and practice are key.

On shipboard, all officers, from first mate to bosun to deckhand, must know his or her job responsibility, dependencies, and authority. The crew all needs to be

clear about what they have to do in times of trouble. To accomplish this, groundwork and run-through are done in advance where activities developed for times of crisis are shown to be workable. Self-reliance and competence in time of need must be learned and rehearsed beforehand.

## **Valid and Excessive Developmental Support**

At times a yeoman or mate (a.k.a. seasoned secretary or experienced senior staff member) can provide neophytes, "fast trackers" or "elevated pretenders" real-time coverage of tasks and decisions. Army sergeants perform this service to new second lieutenants.

These aides serve a developmental purpose for the fledgling officer but they should be needed less as he or she advances in the hierarchy. This is not to mean withdrawal of staff work and advice but development of a mature self-reliance. Eventually, if an aspirant advances to command responsibility they need to lead by depending upon their own decision making ability.

Therefore, it is disconcerting that there is a spate of articles written by executives and aspirants who tout contacting their coach when the going gets rough. It is true that with today's technology, support is just a cell-phone call or e-mail away. But who has the time to become proficient while in crisis mode?

So, leaders, managers, supervisors, mentors, and coaches must help persons develop personally and gain knowledge and skills so they can live independently and function competently. The goal of coaching can be likened to parenting in that it prepares their charge to cease being *dependent* on their help.

## **Reason for The Skipper Metaphor**

The skipper metaphor is used because it is believed the reader can visualize the tumult of a ship on a raging sea and need for competence. An example of impending economic catastrophes would be harder to picture and is invariably debated ad infinitum as to its cause and effect. One just has to observe political activity to see unending claims and counterclaims on both sides of issues.

A seagoing vessel, by its nature, necessitates competent officers and crew. On a ship, the penalty for incompetence can be death to all involved. It would be good to consider something mariners' know: *the bridge sinks with the rest of the ship*. Business executives can often disengage from the fate of the company in their charge and remain aloof from the fate of its employees.

Unfortunately, too many land-based businesses have developed an executive culture that has disengaged risk from reward, performance from pay, action from accountability, knowledge from authority, competence from advancement, and incompetence from job security. These anomalies can prevail because the negative effects on most corporations may be limited to bankruptcy. Few executives consider going down with the ship, so to speak. Instead, they exit with golden parachutes.