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Doing a Job

By Adm. Hyman G. Rickover

Admiral Hyman Rickover (1900-1986), the "Father of the Nuclear Navy," was one of the most successful—and controversial- public managers of the 20th Century. His accomplishments are the stuff of legend. For example, in three short years, Rickover's team designed and built the first nuclear submarine—the Nautilus—an amazing feat of engineering given that it involved the development of the first use of a controlled nuclear reactor. The Nautilus not only transformed submarine warfare, but also laid the groundwork for a whole fleet of nuclear aircraft carriers and cruisers (which was also built by Rickover and his team).

The text below is an excerpt from a speech Rickover delivered at Columbia University in 1982, in which he succinctly outlined his management philosophy. His determination, clarity of purpose, emphasis on developing his people, high standards, and willingness to give his people ownership of their work had to have been very inspiring. He had exceptionally high standards and was known to take some of these same strengths to extremes, however, which no doubt led to his reputation in some circles as being difficult to work for. On that cautionary note, GovLeaders.org is pleased to present Rickover's own description of his management style.

Human experience shows that people, not organizations or management systems, get things done. For this reason, subordinates must be given authority and responsibility early in their careers. In this way they develop quickly and can help the manager do his work. The manager, of course, remains ultimately responsible and must accept the blame if subordinates make mistakes.

As subordinates develop, work should be constantly added so that no one can finish his job. This serves as a prod and a challenge. It brings out their capabilities and frees the manager to assume added responsibilities. As members of the organization become capable of assuming new and more difficult duties, they develop pride in doing the job well. This attitude soon permeates the entire organization.

One must permit his people the freedom to seek added work and greater responsibility. In my organization, there are no formal job descriptions or organizational charts. Responsibilities are defined in a general way, so that people are not circumscribed. All are permitted to do as they think best and to go to anyone and anywhere for help. Each person then is limited only by his own ability.

Complex jobs cannot be accomplished effectively with transients. Therefore, a manager must make the work challenging and rewarding so that his people will remain with the organization for many years. This allows it to benefit fully from their knowledge, experience, and corporate memory.

The Defense Department does not recognize the need for continuity in important jobs. It rotates officer every few years both at headquarters and in the field. The same applies to their civilian superiors.

This system virtually ensures inexperience and nonaccountability. By the time an officer has begun to learn a job, it is time for him to rotate. Under this system, incumbents can blame their problems on predecessors. They are assigned to another job before the results of their work become evident. Subordinates cannot be expected to remain committed to a job and perform effectively when they are continuously adapting to a new job or to a new boss.

When doing a job—any job—one must feel that he *owns* it, and act as though he will remain in the job forever. He must look after his work just as conscientiously, as though it were his own business and his own money. If he feels he is only a temporary custodian, or that the job is just a stepping stone to a higher position, his actions will not take into account the long-term interests of the organization. His lack of commitment to the present job will be perceived by those who work for him, and they, likewise, will tend not to care. Too many spend their entire working lives looking for their next job. When one feels he owns his present job and acts that way, he need have no concern about his next job.

In accepting responsibility for a job, a person must get directly involved. Every manager has a personal responsibility not only to find problems but to correct them. This responsibility comes before all other obligations, before personal ambition or comfort.

A major flaw in our system of government, and even in industry, is the latitude allowed to do less than is necessary. Too often officials are willing to accept and adapt to situations they know to be wrong. The tendency is to downplay problems instead of actively trying to correct them. Recognizing this, many subordinates give up, contain their views within themselves, and wait for others to take action. When this happens, the manager is deprived of the experience and ideas of subordinates who generally are more knowledgeable than he in their particular areas.

A manager must instill in his people an attitude of personal responsibility for seeing a job properly accomplished. Unfortunately, this seems to be declining, particularly in large organizations where responsibility is broadly distributed. To complaints of a job poorly done, one often hears the excuse, “I am not responsible.” I believe that is literally correct. The man who takes such a stand in fact is not responsible; he is irresponsible. While he may not be legally liable, or the work may not have been specifically assigned to him, no one involved in a job can divest himself of responsibility for its successful completion.

Unless the individual truly responsible can be identified when something goes wrong, no one has really been responsible. With the advent of modern management theories it is becoming common for organizations to deal with problems in a collective manner, by dividing programs into subprograms,

more levels of management, on the theory that this gives better control. These are but different forms of shared responsibility, which easily lead to no one being responsible—a problems that often inheres in large corporations as well as in the Defense Department.

When I came to Washington before World War II to head the electrical section of the Bureau of Ships, I found that one man was in charge of design, another of production, a third handled maintenance, while a fourth dealt with fiscal matters. The entire bureau operated that way. It didn't make sense to me. Design problems showed up in production, production errors showed up in maintenance, and financial matters reached into all areas. I changed the system. I made one man responsible for his entire area of equipment—for design, production, maintenance, and contracting. If anything went wrong, I knew exactly at whom to point. I run my present organization on the same principle.

A good manager must have unshakeable determination and tenacity. Deciding what needs to be done is easy, getting it done is more difficult. Good ideas are not adopted automatically. They must be driven into practice with courageous impatience. Once implemented they can be easily overturned or subverted through apathy or lack of follow-up, so a continuous effort is required. Too often, important problems are recognized but no one is willing to sustain the effort needed to solve them.

Nothing worthwhile can be accomplished without determination. In the early days of nuclear power, for example, getting approval to build the first nuclear submarine—the Nautilus—was almost as difficult as designing and building it. Many in the Navy opposed building a nuclear submarine.

In the same way, the Navy once viewed nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and cruisers as too expensive, despite their obvious advantages of unlimited cruising range and ability to remain at sea without vulnerable support ships. Yet today our nuclear submarine fleet is widely recognized as our nation's most effective deterrent to nuclear war. Our nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and cruisers have proven their worth by defending our interests all over the world—even in remote trouble spots such as the Indian Ocean, where the capability of oil-fired ships would be severely limited by their dependence on fuel supplies.

The man in charge must concern himself with details. If he does not consider them important, neither will his subordinates. Yet "the devil is in the details." It is hard and monotonous to pay attention to seemingly minor matters. In my work, I probably spend about ninety-nine percent of my time on what others may call petty details. Most managers would rather focus on lofty policy matters. But when the details are ignored, the project fails. No infusion of policy or lofty ideals can then correct the situation.

To maintain proper control one must have simple and direct means to find out what is going on. There are many ways of doing this; all involve constant drudgery. For this reason those in charge often create "management information systems" designed to extract from the operation the details a busy executive needs to know. Often the process is carried too far. The top official then loses touch with his people and with the work that is actually going on.

Attention to detail does not require a manager to do everything himself. No one can work more than

his subordinates can work to their maximum ability. Some management experts advocate strict limits to the number of people reporting to a common superior—generally five to seven. But if one has capable people who require but a few moments of his time during the day, there is no reason to set such arbitrary constraints. Some forty key people report frequently and directly to me. This enables me to keep up with what is going on and makes it possible for them to get fast action. The latter aspect is particularly important. Capable people will not work for long where they cannot get prompt decisions and actions from their superior.

I require frequent reports, both oral and written, from many key people in the nuclear program. These include the commanding officers of our nuclear ships, those in charge of our schools and laboratories, and representatives at manufacturers' plants and commercial shipyards. I insist they report the problems they have found directly to me—and in plain English. This provides them unlimited flexibility in subject matter—something that often is not accommodated in highly structured management systems—and a way to communicate their problems and recommendations to me without having them filtered through others. The Defense Department, with its excessive layers of management, suffers because those at the top who make decisions are generally isolated from their subordinates, who have the first-hand knowledge.

To do a job effectively, one must set priorities. Too many people let their "in" basket set the priorities. On any given day, unimportant but interesting trivia pass through an office; one must not permit these to monopolize his time. The human tendency is to while away time with unimportant matters that do not require mental effort or energy. Since they can be easily resolved, they give a false sense of accomplishment. The manager must exert self-discipline to ensure that his energy is focused where it is truly needed.

All work should be checked through an independent and impartial review. In engineering and manufacturing, industry spends large sums on quality control. But the concept of impartial reviews and oversight is important in other areas also. Even the most dedicated individual makes mistakes—and many workers are less than dedicated. I have seen much poor work and sheer nonsense generated in government and in industry because it was not checked properly.

One must create the ability in his staff to generate clear, forceful arguments for opposing viewpoints as well as for their own. Open discussions and disagreements must be encouraged, so that all sides of an issue will be fully explored. Further, important issues should be presented in writing. Nothing so sharpens the thought process as writing down one's arguments. Weaknesses overlooked in oral discussion become painfully obvious on the written page.

When important decisions are not documented, one becomes dependent on individual memory, which is quickly lost as people leave or move to other jobs. In my work, it is important to be able to go back a number of years to determine the facts that were considered in arriving at a decision. This makes it easier to resolve new problems by putting them into proper perspective. It also minimizes the risk of repeating past mistakes. Moreover if important communications and actions are not documented clearly, one can never be sure they were understood or even executed.

It is a human inclination to hope things will work out, despite evidence or doubt to the contrary. A

time and energy on a project and thus has come to feel possessive about it. Although it is not easy to admit what a person once thought correct now appears to be wrong, one must discipline himself to face the facts objectively and make the necessary changes—regardless of the consequences to himself. The man in charge must personally set the example in this respect. He must be able, in effect, to "kill his own child" if necessary and must require his subordinates to do likewise. I have had to go to Congress and, because of technical problems, recommended terminating a project that had been funded largely on my say-so. It is not a pleasant task, but one must be brutally objective in his work.

No management system can substitute for hard work. A manager who does not work hard or devote extra effort cannot expect his people to do so. He must set the example. The manager may not be the smartest or the most knowledgeable person, but if he dedicates himself to the job and devotes the required effort, his people will follow his lead.

The ideas I have mentioned are not new—previous generations recognized the value of hard work, attention to detail, personal responsibility, and determination. And these, rather than the highly-touted modern management techniques, are still the most important in doing a job. Together they embody a common-sense approach to management, one that cannot be taught by professors of management in a classroom.

I am not against business education. A knowledge of accounting, finance, business law, and the like can be of value in a business environment. What I do believe is harmful is the impression often created by those who teach management that one will be able to manage any job by applying certain management techniques together with some simple academic rules of how to manage people and situations.