

Leadership Paper

CSC 424 – Software Engineering

James Setliff

April 17, 2021

Leadership is an incredibly unique quality. People often have an easy time recalling horrible bosses, but when asked about the great leaders in their life they have a much harder time responding. Meanwhile, leadership training is a huge industry, as highly motivated, advancement seeking professionals take every possible advantage to make them stand out from the crowd, and many companies require their employees to take leadership courses as part of an on-the-job training program. At the same time though, many industry leaders have publicly said they are not interested in just well-trained or well-educated individuals, and they often go to incredible lengths to identify candidates with qualities that cannot be so easily added to a resume. So, what is in the secret sauce? Like a gumbo, I believe you can combine just about any qualities in a person and end up with a good leader, but at the same time, it is very easy to add too much of one thing or not enough of another and mess it up. What ends up making a good leader is subjective to the people that are being led, but I think there are a few key qualities that overlap across my experiences that make for a good leader. I also shy away from idolizing people I do not know personally. It is already hard enough to truly get to know a person, I do not think it is worthwhile to place my hopes and dreams on the shoulders of someone's story that has been romanticized to death. Except Theodore Roosevelt, I think he's cool, but he will not be on the list.

As I have probably said about a hundred times, as people with military experience tend to do, I was in the U.S. Coast Guard for a decade. I think anyone with military experience is going to include at least one person from their time in the service in a list like this, but I do not believe that the military necessarily makes good leaders. In fact, as I stated at the start of this paper, it would be much easier for me to catalog all the bad leaders I have served under. There is one man though, someone I encountered very early on that made a huge impression on me and the way I would seek to define myself as a leader, Senior Chief Kerry Wagoner. There are a few things that require explanation for this story to have real impact, so first the rank. In the Navy and the Coast Guard, Chief, Senior Chief, and Master Chief, are the most senior enlisted ranks and the insignia for those ranks are an anchor, an anchor with one star, and an anchor with two stars, respectively. Simply being a Senior Chief put him around the top ten percent of the most senior enlisted leadership in the Coast Guard. It is a big deal, and to put it in perspective, he was the single Senior Chief for the entire ship. However, he did not have a remarkable career, he had just stuck with it for a long time. His experiences were like everyone else of our rating, Boatswain's Mate. He had started out painting boats and standing watch, had made long trips underway, and been involved in search and rescue and drug interdiction, the same as the rest of us. However, time and experience are irreplaceable, and it was obvious that he had a comfortable command of both the textbook knowledge and experience that senior people temper that with. After all, there is always a correct way to do something, and a different way to do it better. Obviously, I have a lot of respect for this guy, and he was a large part of why I chose the career path I did.

The specific moment that set the standard of my view of leadership in the military came about a year into my career. The mid-level enlisted (E-4s and E-5s) had been complaining about lack of respect from the new and junior enlisted and the ship's command asked one of the junior officers and Senior Chief Wagoner to basically put us all in a room until we worked it out. They went around the room and asked for input and feedback, most of which I no longer remember at

this point, but I do recall one guy specifically being incredibly upset that his every command was not immediately executed. Senior Chief's response, however, is burned into my memory.

"We are on a ship, a thousand miles from land and hours from help if we ever needed it. Every single person on this ship is dependent on each other for our ensured safety and survival. If you are unwilling or unable to listen to feedback from someone just because they are junior to you, you need to request a transfer and get your ass off this boat. If I *ever* have to use my anchor to get something done, I have failed as a leader. These young men trust me because they know I have their backs and I trust them for the same reason. Rank will only ever buy you the bare minimum, and if you rely on that you're always gonna be disappointed. Do better."

That advice is not directly applicable to every situation or job, but I take the lesson with me everywhere I go now, and I think it is key to being a competent and effective leader. This situation really helped to define in my mind a deference between "demanding" and "commanding." We should all strive to pull each other up, whatever the situation, and leaders should operate from a position of trust instead of demanding respect.

Sometimes lessons are learned through hardship instead of triumph, as is the case with the second person I will use as an example. This person runs contrary to the prompt for the paper, but I cannot think of better example of qualification versus competency. When Senior Chief Wagoner retired, his replacement, Chief Evans came to the ship and it was a complete one-eighty. This situation was very difficult for me as both a young man and a newly promoted E-4. I had grown and prospered until Senior Chief's guidance and had learned to trust his guidance and wisdom, and his replacement was so monumentally deficient, it made me question the choice of career path I had taken. Chief Evans was the type of person that cited manuals at every turn, but his knowledge was over a decade out of date. He spent his days in the break room, only to turn up a few minutes before the end of the workday to insist we needed to stay late to make a deadline. He refused time and time again to stick his neck out for his department and did nothing to insulate his junior people from manipulation and interference from other departments. He would give incorrect instructions for work project and then throw the blame on me and the people under me. I had to grow up, fast. I started following behind him to make sure people were on the right track for every little task. I had to intercept orders to verify we were getting the supplies we needed to get jobs done. And I had to learn to deal with a disgruntled workforce.

Incompetence can not be hidden forever, however, and one night it reared its ugly head and nearly cost a man his life. It was the middle of the night, just after 1:00 am off the coast of South Florida. I was standing watch with Chief Evans, he was the Officer-of-the-Deck, responsible for the ship while the Captain was asleep and I was the Quartermaster, responsible for safely navigating the ship home. He was off in his own world, not really paying attention, and I was trying to correctly tune the radar because he could or would not. I had heard a few garbled radio calls, which I had brushed off as something too far off to come in clearly. Seated at the navigation terminal in between a radar screen and a chart screen, I happened to look up, out the forward windows and thought I saw a small flash of light. My brain started to do the mental

gymnastics necessary to connect unrelated dots and I called out to Chief that I thought something might be out in front of us. He came over to his own radar terminal and started searching for a trace of what might be out in front of us. We received another garbled radio call, and suddenly there was a straight line from A to B in my head. The radio calls were likely from a disabled or underpowered vessel and that vessel was likely directly in front of us attempting to flash a light at us. I moved to the helm and asked Chief Evans for a steering command. He reached for the clipboard containing the script used to call the Captain during the night when we had a contact visually or by radar. I loudly asked again for a rudder command as he ignored me and scribbled on the clipboard. I could see the light plainly ahead of us now, about 200 yards away as we cruised ahead at 14 knots. I looked over at Chief one more time and clicked the helm over to manual control, uttered a repeat-back of "Left hard rudder, aye" as if he had given the command and put the ship into a hard right emergency turn. While completely capable of such a maneuver, it certainly was not gentle, and the Captain was on the bridge in about fifteen seconds. I watched the disabled sailboat drift down our port side about 40 yards away from us. We ended up launching the small boat and sending an electrician over. The sailboat captain thanked us and went on his way right as the sun started to rise.

That man nearly lost his sailboat and possibly his life that night because an incompetent person was allowed in a position he was not qualified to hold. There was an internal investigation and I laid out everything as it happened, the same as I explained here. In the end, he was not punished, he did not even lose his qualification to stand watch. I was told by the Executive Officer that sometimes there is just nothing you can do about senior people, especially once they are at a certain point in their career. So, what do you do with a lesson like that? Personally, I swore that no one I had under me would become that person. It is never enough to say "Oh, I used to do this all the time, it's fine." Or to say, "I'm a Chief, I know what I'm doing." In the same way that my old Senior Chief said rank does not equal respect, seniority does not mean competency, and I am always monitoring myself to make sure I do not fall into that trap. Good leaders do not rest on their laurels, and professional development never ends. There is always something new to learn, and skills can always be further refined.

The last person I would like to talk about is my most recent, but former boss, Cari. I took an internship at NASA a few summers ago, thinking it was just that, a Summer Internship. It ended up being full time employment and I spent one and half years as a Software Tester at the NASA Shared Services Center. I ultimately would not realize the depths of Cari's abilities until I changed positions in January of this year, transitioning to a Scrum Master position. She was always a good and personable manager, always conscious of the unique position the interns were in trying to balance work with school and the stress associated with both of those things. Cari is a truly empathetic person, in a way I will never be, and often would come to talk to about what was bothering me before it had even dawned on me to be bothered. She routinely checks in with her group, often right around the time you would start to think "Huh, haven't heard from Cari in a while." All the while, it was also obvious that she treated each person differently based on where their interests and capabilities lay. She truly is a marvelous personnel manager.

And then I crossed the threshold. When I took the Scrum Master position, I was suddenly inundated with a mess of politics and in-fighting I was completely unaware was even happening. A year and a half I had toiled away as a happy little intern, coming to her with my petty complaints if she did not beat me to it, but then I left her protective sphere and realized the fully burden she insulates her staff from. On multiple occasions since I have transitioned to my new position, we have left meetings and I will have to reach out to her and just reiterate how amazing it is that I had no idea things were so tumultuous.

I have never identified as “the man,” even when I started to take on higher roles and more responsibilities. I always felt like I was one of the guys, a grunt, a worker-bee, and I let my frustrations out with my team. I always thought that was how they would know I was fighting for them, like Senior Chief did for us, but now I realize how dangerous that can be. I left my testing job on a Friday and rolled into my new position the following Monday and I immediately thought I had made a mistake. However, I realize now that if I were forced to deal with all the political games as a tester, I never would have made it a year and a half, and I would never have had the opportunity to take that next position. I realize now that the empathy that Cari brings to the job does not have anything to do with work, and that it is not necessary to talk shop in that way to make a connection with people. I have always felt that Cari’s interest in my life and problems is a sincere one, and I now have that as a goal moving forward.

To me, this is the secret sauce: being trustworthy, being competent, and being empathetic, and I believe they all build on one-another. Working towards any of these helps to build the others. Leaders need to build their teams up, and the team needs to trust the leader’s direction. Leaders need to continue to learn and develop themselves, and that will be reflected in the team’s competency and ability. Leaders must be empathetic, they need to know when to push and when to pull back, and that will be reflected in the team’s productivity and overall mood. And finally, great leaders will pass these skillsets on to those around them. Great teams are often comprised of multiple leaders, who all contribute their strengths and cover each other’s weaknesses, to the benefit of everyone.