A Tale of Two Captains â€“ Leadership Strategy & Tactics vs Popularity

Description

The purpose of the post is to discuss a similarity between our national leadership issues of the day and the manner in which I closely observed two men lead ships. The names will remain anonymous, but suffice it to say, I know them both well, as I served with both of them.

The Presidentâ€™s poll numbers go down and I suggest, that means something good. The left and the press think itâ€™s bad, butâ€¦consider for a moment the coaches and teachers in your life. When you consider those that helped you not only pull yourself up by your bootstraps, but in reality (which you can only see now, many years separated from the days of your discontent) were the ones who lifted you so you could climb that awfully tall wall in front of you. Thatâ€™s a metaphor for challenges you faced, mentally, physically or emotionally. I would wager that the times when you were saying â€œI just CANâ€™T DO IT!â€• to them, they put on their game face, got in yours and told you, in any of many ways, that yes, you can and not only that, I say you will. You had the feeling somewhere between mild dislike and hate just about then, butâ€¦.look where that moment took you? Right now, â€œweâ€• (using the polls published by the HBM/MSM) soundly dislike our President. My thesis is that will change.

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In mulling over the topic the last few days, I think I have settled on the functional, short and to the point definitions of â€œstrategyâ€• and â€œtactics.â€• Strategy is what you want to do, and tactics are how you get that done. In the case of the national strategy, most people seems to agree. Itâ€™s how â€œweâ€• do it that is the root of the political problem just this moment.

Two captains, two ships, same strategic goal, polar opposite tactics, kind of like America right now.

Goal: Be the best ship in the fleet.

Tactics:

Captain A: You achieve this goal by caring for the crew. You care for the crew by not letting them fail. You set them up for success.

Ok, sounds simple, but, you ask, â€œhow did it look?â€• It looked like a lot of unhappy sailors and officers, who couldnâ€™t understand why they had to stay aboard until 2000 while inport, re-doing every single damage control (DC) planned maintenance system (PMS) check on the entire ship. It also looked like, when the Board of Inspection and Survey (INSERV) Plan of Action and Milestones (POA&M) was written 4 months before the inspection, in the fall of the year (yep, two major holiday periods were between the POA&M and the INSURV), a whole bunch of upset people who all of a sudden had to make sure the maintenance (not the hard part) and administration of things that should have been taken care of daily, had to be checked and re-checked a few times. Sometimes publications, special tools or consumables had to be located and obtained, consisting of much hiking the piers and â€œbegging.â€• It looked like drills, drills and drills in all areas of the shipâ€™s required warfare areas beginning right after the INSURV and before heading to GTMO for 4 weeks of refresher training. You get the idea. Work to be done per the regs and tactical and tech manuals, and people, on the ship with

the highest operational tempo on the entire coast the 12 months preceding this, who wanted some downtime to see their families. The result, was officers and sailors who would, as they walked the piers in search of â€œgougeâ€• or stuff, would bad mouth the CO. He was, the spawn of the devil, and just here to make their life miserable.

Captain B: You achieve this goal by caring for the crew. You care for the crew by making sure they are happy and get to do what they ask to do, like seeing family, a lot. How did that look? It looked like a smiling crew that loved their CO, and knew he would make sure they got max time â€œon the beach.â€• Not much more to say about that.

Background of the â€œplayers:â€•

Captain A: Aloof, intellectual on the outside. Essentially interacted with the XO, and then let the XO â€œexecute.â€• The command climate was not of any one screaming, or belittling, or even discriminating, just the over arching understanding that shooting for 100% was the only acceptable way.

Captain B: Gregarious, intellectual. While the XO took care of the daily details, the CO was accessible and regularly saw junior crewmen and officers without really upholding the chain of command. Command climate was pleasant, personable.

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Outcome:

Captain A: Never once was the crew required to stay aboard overnight while in homeport (other than the duty section). Late working hours were done to make sure major things were gotten under control but were actually not a routine thing. The ship still steamed a lot, but that was the state of the operating fleet at the time, he didnâ€™t ask for any extra, butâ€¦.the interesting partâ€¦got it because his ship was always ready to operate, and the squadron and group commanders knew that. When someone else couldnâ€™t go, the phone rang on our Quarterdeck.

More outcome: Every single inspection or assist visit, or training event went exceptionally well. The crew and officers were knowledgeable, the equipment was functional and they go the top scores to show, but the emphasis was not on any one event. The crew then walked up and down the piers, chests puffed out (rightfully so) and told their friends and professional peers how â€œtheyâ€• had done so well. The follow on operational deployment was smooth, with all aspects of the preparations having been taken care of in a proper and timely fashion. Departmental â€œEâ€•s were the norm and, others sought the advice of the seasoned men who did so well. One crusty old mustang DC inspector from INSURV said â€œin 36 months, this is the best DC Iâ€™ve seen.â€• The Captain leading the INSURV Team said â€œWeâ€™re not in the business of complimenting anyone, but this ship is the best run one my team and I have seen.â€• Every single medal the CO had the discretion of awarding was pinned on those who did the work. Letters of Commendation and Appreciation flowed to recognize that many had â€œturned toâ€• to make it all happen. The CO still was not well liked and departed the ship, with many under the breath â€œgood ridancesâ€• mumbled near the Quarterdeck.

Regardless of the dislike of the departed CO, the ship enjoyed a reputation earned through professionalism, well into the next COâ€™s tour. They could be counted upon to get it done.

Captain B: The crew got lots of time ashore. So much that when things heated up in the Middle East, they had so much to do, they couldnâ€™t even get the required training and inspection visits done during work ups. The final combat systems evaluation was held as they steamed from homeport, headed east for the Suez and the Persian Gulf. The ship, during the detect to engage practice runs, could not get a single system to operate properly, the net result, the target F-14 did a flyover at mast height, having not been engaged by a single system from a run that began at maximum air search radar range. Training records were pretty much devoid of entires, the training team couldnâ€™t even fake their way through the drills. Discussions of the outcome of the inspection were discussed between the two top officers in the chain of command. The ship was stripped off the battle group and left behindâ€¦The families of the crew, as well as the crew had some explaining to do to thier friends. The man, headed for a star, was out of the running. A major ship did not fulfill their mission when the time came. Careers suffered across the board and the waterfront scuttlebutt wasnâ€™t to kind.

What happened?

When the crunch came, Captain B said â€œwe donâ€™t know if weâ€™ll see our families again, so spend as much time as you can with them.â€•

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While not ever being in the exact set of circumstances, Captain Aâ€™s philosophy was to make sure the crew was prepared, so they would come home to their families. He never gave the Naval version of Pattonâ€™s famous speech, but that was the center piece of his beliefs.

I kept in contact with the crew from Captain Aâ€™s ship, when they would call and ask for guidance in setting things up the way he had. As the junior officers and the middle grade enlisted men rose in rank and commensurate responsibility, they then understood the compassion and brilliance of the Captain they liked to tell their peers about, in not so glowing terms. They continued to do well, but, I fear, they may never have had the opportunity, or will take the time, to let Captain A know he set them on a course they would not go on themselves.

Thus ends the story of two men with the same top level vision. I think it applies today to the political storms we are aggravated with daily. Regardless of the things said on the left, some consciously, and I suspect most of the others subconsciously, really donâ€™t want to lose the war on terror.

Those who are not the Commander-in-Chief, seem to be cut from the Captain B style cloth when it comes to tactics of how to â€œwin.â€• Certainly the President is in Captain Aâ€™s camp.

History is now in the making, but will not be understood for many years to come. I see President Bush as one of those types who know we can do better, andâ€¦more importantly, must do better, in order to survive. He is one who will ignore the name calling, divisive maneuvering and stay the course. One day, when the Middle East is calm, and the worst things they do to each other is what we do now: Use the media to call each other bad names, possibly we can look back and understand the â€œcoachâ€• got us there.

Postscript: Captain A knew well of the way he was presented. He â€œdrove on,â€• knowing he had to get the crew ready for combat conditions, even though he would not sail on the next deployment. His feeling were not important if they would get in the way of his goal to keep his sailors alive by ensuring they would be victorious, if the challenge arose. I hope that parallel will also be presented by the leadership of this nation. He used the word â€œindefatigableâ€• in a fitness report once, which caught

my eye. He certainly had that attribute himself.

Summary: You do what is right by your people and they will not only survive, but thrive. What is right is making them better, even if they label you as â€œout of touchâ€• or â€œmean.â€• If you let the people have their choice, you set them on a course for shoal waters and, if not a good scare, then a grounding from which, at the least, reputations are ruined, and at the worst, people die.

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