

# The Full Nelson: Leadership Lessons from a British Naval Hero

David Hurst

**T**he heroic model of leadership, in which great accomplishments in the corporate world are attributed to single individuals, is alive and well in the popular business press despite the fact that for the past ten years this model has been disparaged by management academics and consultants alike. These academics and consultants now advocate a more situational, distributed view, in which leadership is no longer seen as a bundle of traits possessed by a single leader but as a complex process occurring among leaders and followers at many levels of an organization and in a variety of contexts.

In the public arena, however, the popular vision of the heroic leader remains undimmed. A testament to the power of this vision is the extended celebration that took place in Britain in 2005 commemorating the life and heroic death of vice admiral Lord Horatio Nelson. The occasion for this outpouring of national pride was the bicentennial of the Battle of Trafalgar. On October 21, 1805, Nelson inflicted a devastating defeat on the combined French and Spanish fleets, only to die him-

self at the moment of victory, cut down by a sniper's musket ball.

It is difficult for those who don't live in England to appreciate the adulation accorded to Nelson and the enthusiasm shown in the hundreds of celebrations that took place around the country. The historical events surrounding Nelson are far beyond living memory. Yet in England, when people are asked to think of great countrymen, the name of Horatio Nelson is second only to that of Winston Churchill. Part of the reason for this is the highly emotional context of those distant times, for the decades after the American Revolutionary War were a dark time for England: the American colonies had been lost and the chaos of the French Revolution in 1789 had been followed by the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, who by 1805 had made himself master of Europe. In Europe only England, protected by the sea and the Royal Navy, stood against Napoleon.

## TIME FOR REFLECTION

For students of management the bicentennial of the Battle of Trafalgar and the death of Nelson was an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which leadership skills are developed in institutional contexts. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Royal Navy was by far the

largest and most efficient organization in Britain. Commercial organizations were in their infancy, so the navy was a magnet for able young men who, with neither wealth nor family connections, needed to earn a living.

Much has been made of Nelson's personal qualities, and there is no doubt that he was an exceptionally talented and daring individual who had a rare touch with people. But it was the capacity of the navy's officers and sailors to execute and coordinate complex moves under an extraordinary variety of conditions that gave Nelson free rein in exercising his brilliance. Using exemplary seamanship, he was able to concentrate his strengths against enemy weaknesses and deliver devastating attacks. Once his ships were in the right positions and at point-blank range, he and his fellow officers knew that the British gunners could fire a broadside every two minutes—a rate many times faster than that of the French and Spanish ships opposing them. The confidence this generated among the Royal Navy's commanders—and their consequent habit of engaging the enemy closely and aggressively—gave the British sailors a reputation for ferocity. The victory at Trafalgar guaranteed British naval supremacy for more than a hundred years after.

What kind of training allowed the Royal Navy to produce a stream of

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*Editor's note: Issues & Observations is a venue for CCL staff members and associates to express their personal views about leadership.*

talented officers and capable seamen over such an extended period of time? In today's business world we know that the best leadership development programs for people working in large organizations deliver particular kinds of experiences, namely, challenging assignments, bosses who have a significant impact on their subordinates, and hardships. These three factors were the hallmarks of the Royal Navy of Nelson's era, and his brother officers experienced them throughout their careers.

Nelson himself went to sea at the age of twelve and spent thirty of his forty-seven years afloat. He served on at least twenty-five ships and commanded vessels of progressively larger sizes. His challenges covered all the perils of sailing and fighting in wartime conditions as well as a variety of land-based tests—everything from assaults by way of rivers to sieges of towns and forts.

He was given many of these assignments while he was young—his first command, of the schooner *Little Lucy*, occurred when he was nineteen—and these early experiences gave him both an outsider's and a seaman's perspective on the navy. He refused to ask his men to do anything he would not do himself, and this led to the widespread perception that Nelson was always on the side of fairness for common sailors and officers alike. There is no doubt that as with many of today's successful managers, this approach was aided greatly by the variety of bosses and role models Nelson had as he made his way up the ladder of promotion. His uncle, Captain Maurice Suckling, was his original role model, mentor, and sponsor, and later, as comptroller of the navy, Suckling became Nelson's patron. Nelson had a knack for forming close ties with senior officers under whom he served, and many of them remained friends and mentors throughout his life.

Nelson discovered early in his career that it was better to persuade than to command. In the Royal Navy there was a natural *discipline of the service*, what the early-twentieth-century management writer Mary Parker Follett called the *law of the situation*. On a ship everyone is aware of the situation and alive to the inherent dangers. Most orders are seen not as arbitrary dictates from above but as intelligent responses to the situation designed to promote the welfare of

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the organization as a whole. Thus, at sea, technical expertise and committed teamwork have survival value, and would-be autocrats ignore them at their peril.

The isolated existence of a ship at sea magnifies both the strengths and weaknesses of a ship's captain, and Nelson's commanding officers (his "bosses") ran the gamut of leadership styles. He spent two years on the frigate *Seahorse* with the fierce disciplinarian George Farmer, who had a reputation for having two men flogged every week. Nelson then served under the kindly James Pigot on the *Dolphin*. Later, battle-hardened veteran William Locker, captain of the *Lowestoft*, became one of Nelson's mentors and a close friend. Well-read and gregarious, Locker was an important catalyst for the development of Nelson's habits and character. As Nelson rose in seniority, he made a habit of taking on a similar mentorship role with his subordi-

nates, introducing them to people in society who could help them in their careers. In an era when patronage was essential to career development, officers such as Nelson were much sought after by subordinates for the development opportunities they offered, not to mention the chance of glory from successful actions and personal wealth from captured ships, or *prizes*.

## HONING TEAMWORK

Naval life during this era is often described as one long hardship. Apart from the extended periods away from land and family, the close quarters, and the heavy manual labor, there were the ever-present hazards of disease and accident (which together accounted for 85 percent of the Royal Navy's fatalities), not to mention shipwreck and enemy action. Nelson and other British officers sailed their ships in every conceivable circumstance, from the hurricanes and shoals of the West Indies to the storms and sandbanks of the North Sea. British warships were more than twice as likely to be lost through wrecking or foundering as they were through enemy action. But it was this intensive seafaring practice that developed and honed the teamwork essential for excellence in sailing and gunnery. In contrast the French and Spanish fleets, penned up in their ports by a British blockade, had far less opportunity to develop these skills. As a result the morale of their officers and sailors was low, and French admiral Pierre Villeneuve knew he was beaten even before he set out to sea from Cadiz, Spain, on October 20, 1805.

The slowness of communications resulted in a high degree of decentralization in the management of the Royal Navy and encouraged individual initiative on the part of its commanders. This decentralization often allowed subordinates to realize their

commanders' intentions without necessarily obeying specific instructions. Nelson made his intentions clear to the captains under his command by socializing regularly with them. Every evening, when the weather was calm, his commanders would row across to Nelson's ship and discuss naval strategy and tactics over dinner. When the time came for action, everyone knew how to respond to opportunities as they appeared and what to expect from his colleagues.

Like many heroes, Nelson had his flaws; his virtues were mixed with faults. He could be vain and arrogant, and his affair with Lady Emma Hamilton scandalized polite society. Not all his battles were victories; several of his failures occurred when he was out of his element, in land-based attacks. In these ventures he lost his right arm and his vision in one eye.

Despite Nelson's flaws, when it came to duty and service, his focus was totally on professionalism and execution built through long years of challenging assignments, bosses who had a significant influence on him, and hardships.

## NEW CHALLENGES

In the Royal Navy of Nelson's era the contexts and experiences that develop leadership talent were supplied without conscious design. In large modern organizations, however, where young managers are often insulated from the elements, such experiences cannot be left to chance.

Organizations should create career paths that expose young managers to new challenges every two to four years and that prepare them to benefit from these assignments. To become skilled in execution, managers should receive timely, specific feedback on their actions, preferably from their peers and mentors. (Feedback delayed is feedback denied.) Effective mentors should be identified, and young managers should be allocated to them for regular discussions.

It generally takes ten years to develop an expert in any complex skill, whether it's golf, chess, or managing a business. Developing expert managers takes a lot of hard work, often in the face of resistance to change from inside the organization.

One of the most important insights to be gained from Nelson's story is that there are three main sources of discipline in an organization: discipline imposed from above, discipline at the bottom of the organization (self-discipline), and what Nelson would have called the *discipline of the sea*—discipline imposed

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by the shared understanding of the organization's situation and possible futures.

Discipline imposed from the top is the least effective of the three, but it often seems to be the default choice of many managers. No doubt this reflects what a major challenge it is for managers to create a discipline of the sea without the physical contexts of ships and oceans. Managers who have participated in outdoor leadership courses are familiar with this problem: in the outdoor context participants change their behaviors adaptively, but no sooner are they back in the workplace than all their old habits return.

One of Nelson's techniques that is available to all managers is the use of the shared meal as a leadership development tool. Effective managers

know that one of the best ways to build a capable team is to share a meal together on a regular basis.

In some societies this practice is institutionalized. In Japan, for instance, it is impractical for managers to have open discussions with their subordinates during the day—the formality of their relationships and the pace of work make it impossible. But in the evenings at the karaoke bar, when the beer is flowing, almost any topic can be broached without fear of retribution. In saunas in Finland, managers dressed in towels rather than suits can raise the most sensitive of issues.

The social networks, honest dialogue, and camaraderie that emerge from such interactions are invaluable and are difficult to duplicate in any other way. The major benefit of many leadership development programs may be that they offer plenty of opportunities to eat together. Indeed, the three best sessions in many such development programs are often breakfast, lunch, and dinner—provided of course that the example of the Royal Navy is not followed too literally and the participants go easy on the salt pork and the biscuits with weevils. ♪

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