

## Library Leadership Lessons Gleaned from WWII Submariners

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### Abstract

Many aspects of good leadership have not changed over time. This article uses examples from World War II submarining, particularly Capt. Eugene Fluckey's experiences, as a launching point for discussing modern academic library leadership. There are six points of leadership discussed which alternate between submarining and libraries: selecting team members, cross-training, respecting the individual, developing esprit de corps, communicating hard truths, and thinking big thoughts.

### Introduction

At the beginning of World War II, submarines were seen as fragile and vulnerable. Captains were trained to remain submerged all day hunting for enemy ships sitting in one place or moving at a couple miles per hour on battery power. Temperatures inside the submarine would rise to 130 degrees.<sup>1</sup> Oxygen levels would drop so low that lit matches would immediately go out. No one could use the bathroom during the day because the burst of air used to expel waste might give away the submarine's location. Then at night they would surface to change locations and charge their batteries. By the end of the war, bold leaders were running on the surface day and night and attacking land targets with rockets. The submarines did not change significantly during the war, but the leaders did. Capt. Eugene Fluckey summarized it by saying, "it inspired me to see that submarining had risen to its full, mature potential."<sup>2</sup> Leaders reevaluated the capabilities and risks and became the hunters rather than the hunted. What are the expectations of what libraries can be today? Are we creeping along under the waves, or boldly cruising on the surface?

I have identified the following five areas in which effective leaders and managers can improve their team; then a sixth area which separates visionary leaders from effective managers.

1. Selecting team members
2. Cross-training
3. Respecting the individual
4. Developing esprit de corps
5. Communicating hard truths

Then a sixth area, which separates visionary leaders from effective managers:

6. Thinking big thoughts

This paper will look at each of these areas of leadership from the World War II submariner's perspective and then from the librarian perspective.

## Selecting Team Members (Navy)

The first leadership area is selecting team members. Approximately 3.8 million people served in the United States Navy during World War II; 250,000 men volunteered for service aboard submarines, but only 20,000 men and 2000 officers served aboard submarines.<sup>3</sup> How did the US Navy narrow the 250,000 down to 22,000? They used written tests of knowledge and personality as well as stressful simulations of real-world submarine life, which included performing tasks in a small metal room with temperatures at 130 degrees Fahrenheit. People with claustrophobia or high anxiety or people who were too talkative, too quiet, too slow, or too independent were weeded out.<sup>4</sup> The US Navy was very selective, and they focused on a mix of skills, aptitudes, and personality. Even though all of these factors were considered, mental fitness was actually the critical factor.<sup>5</sup> The US Navy knew that the greatest risk for a submarine would be the men not functioning as a team because unit cohesion on long submarine missions would be critical.

## Selecting Team Members (Library)

What does selecting team members look in the library? Most leaders inherit their team and office culture, which is why each new hire is so critical. After each departure from your organization, you have a new team. After each hire onto your team, you have a new team. Everything changes to some degree after each departure and each arrival including relationships, reporting, workflow, and conflict levels.

One practical application for libraries of the Navy's way of selecting a team is to put more emphasis on how the person will fit into the team. Having extensive experience and intelligence will not make new hires a good addition to the team if they treat their coworkers poorly and break down the team rather than build it up. In my experience the old adage, "Hire the best person and train for the skills" is true, but we are usually tempted to hire the person with the most experience and not look for personality issues which would affect how well the person would fit into the team. Also, Human Resources offices are often more concerned about avoiding lawsuits than highly functioning teams, so they really want you to hire the person who is strongest on paper. That is the most defensible decision to Human Resources.

Two ways for you to get the best person with the best aptitude, attitude, and ability to learn are to keep your minimum and preferred requirements short and broad and ask the professional references about teamwork. If you want an entry-level librarian, do not require one year of experience because that does not necessarily get you better people but definitely limits your applicant pool. Sometimes for staff positions, you want to hire someone in a particular pay range. One of the ranges at my institution requires three years of experience. Our Human Resources office assumed we wanted three years of library experience, but we changed it to three years of clerical experience. That change broadened the candidate pool from five to forty people. We were able to select and interview from a much broader pool.

When talking to a candidate's professional references, ask questions about experience and aptitudes as well as teamwork. We ask for the following:

- Comments on the quality of the candidate's library work (experience)
- Comments on the candidate's flexibility (aptitude)

- Examples of the candidate's initiative (aptitude)
- Comments on the candidate's ability to learn new skills (aptitude)
- Comments on how well the candidate gets along with coworkers (teamwork)

In my experience, most offices have low staff turnover so each new hire is an important opportunity for the leader to improve the organization. Focusing on personality and fitting in with the team does not endorse or encourage illegal discrimination against anyone based on gender, race, religion, or any other protected class. Having a diverse staff who are all interested in working together is critical.

### **Cross-Training (Navy)**

Cross-training in the US Navy submarine force meant that every sailor, officers and crew, knew every job on the sub through a process called qualification. Every member of the crew could maneuver the sub, dive, fire torpedoes, charge batteries, and immediately identify what each pipe contained and which valves could stop or change the flow through it. When submariners obtained all these skills, they were allowed to wear the double dolphin insignia. That qualification was a matter of great pride and it meant they could stay in the submarine force. One sailor later recalled, "We all had to know "everything." We had to count on each other to know our own jobs and our neighbor's, too.... They watched me like a hawk. I must measure up or it would be back to the relief crew."<sup>6</sup>

In World War II, the US Navy sailed the ships, but the Marines ran the ports. This qualification system for submariners was foreign to the Marines, so when a submarine went to San Diego for an overhaul, the Marines wanted the captain or executive officer plus half the crew to stay on board at all times. One submariner concluded, "This was hard going for a group of sailors ... who were competent individually to take on any responsibility which might present itself."<sup>7</sup>

On another occasion the officers of the USS Barb planned an assault. The ship's captain, Eugene Fluckey floated the idea of him leading the assault himself. Jim Lanier, the ship's executive officer and navigator, took exception to the suggestion.

When I requested a volunteer to lead the assault force, each one raised his hand, myself included. Jim grabbed my arm and pulled it down. "Captain, you're indispensable."

"Wrong, Jim, anytime someone in Barb is indispensable our organization is faulty."<sup>8</sup>

In this case, Jim was successful in convincing the captain that he was responsible for the ship and all of the lives on it so he could not be a part of the assault team, but Capt. Fluckey's point remains valid that everyone should be able to do every job and no one person should be indispensable for the organization to succeed. By that definition, how many library organizations are faulty?

### **Cross-Training (Library)**

The importance of cross-training for libraries is obvious. How many positions in your library can only be done by one person? Since many libraries have been downsizing, the people who do jobs like interlibrary loan, original cataloging, patron loads, course reserves, fine

appeals, gift processing, activating electronic collections, troubleshooting systems, moving funds, and running reports may not have a backup.

Last year my small department of eight people had three retirements in three months. (I don't think it had to do with my leadership.) One of those people was not a team player, so they were unwilling to share their knowledge or train their replacement. It has taken months for our department to recover, but we are getting there. If cross-training had been part of our office culture, it would have been much easier.

Cross-training helps the organization, but it also helps the employees. Doing the same job year after year can get dull. Cross-training adds challenge and stimulation. Also, cross-training can build morale because staff can face downsizing with more confidence if they can do more jobs besides their own. When I arrived at my current job, my department had several thirty-year employees sitting right next to each other who had no idea how to do each other's work. That was not good. Cross-training will become more and more important as departments downsize leaving libraries one person deep in staffing and not ready for someone's extended sickness or retirement.

### Respect for the Individual (Navy)

Here is an encounter recalled by Capt. Fluckey:

For a breather, I climbed up to the bridge to see how Bill Walker was finishing his first officer-of-the-deck watch alone. "How is it going, Bill?"

"No prob, Sir. Much better than having a junior officer looking over my shoulder and telling me what I should do."

"Bill, what's the first thing you do as a subschool grad when you join a submarine?"

"Go to work, Sir."

"No, you hang your lieutenant's stripes on the gangway and look, learn, and listen to those who are qualified. When you're qualified, you put them back on. That's submarining."

"Understood, Sir."<sup>9</sup>

Capt. Fluckey valued the contributions of his crew and did not want pride to get in the way of this officer's education. In important ways, rank mattered less to him than what the person knew and could do for the ship.

Here is another recollection from Capt. Fluckey:

During the various stages of training, I wandered around from room to room, observing the verve and seriousness with which instruction was being given. Each man realized his one mistake could sink us all. Better ways to accomplish things and good ideas could come from bottom to top. No enmity, no professional jealousy, no incompatibility existed; the Barb melded all into one proud team.... I vowed I would not let them down. Drive yourself and lead others was my philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

## Respect for the Individual (Library)

People like to be led by someone they think is working harder than they do - "Drive yourself and lead others." Our goal as leaders is to have a high-performing team just as Capt. Fluckey saw his crew "melding into one proud team."

Librarians have a multi-tiered structure (librarians, administrators, and staff) which is similar to the military (Department of Defense, officers, and enlisted) so some of the challenges of creating "one proud team" are similar. I have heard librarians complain when someone without a Master's degree in library science is called a librarian. Librarians need to show the importance of their degree by the quality of their work and leadership rather than by the diploma on their wall. Yes, there are times when filling positions with MLS librarians is necessary and important. However, in librarians' day-to-day interactions with staff, it looks like pride and insecurity to point out the distinction, and it interferes with creating a well-functioning team. Job descriptions and job duties need to be accurately delineated so librarians are doing primarily professional work and staff are primarily doing non-professional work, as defined locally. There can be overlapping duties (like a staff covering the reference desk), but if people are content to do what they are supposed to do then everyone can focus on serving the library's patrons.

Another way to respect the individual is to optimize the way you treat each team member so you communicate effectively with each one. One of my staff members was sensitive to criticism, slow to embrace change, and overreacted to minor workflow changes I initiated. Needless to say, he did not make a good first impression with me as his feathers were frequently ruffled. As I met with this staff member on a regular basis for one-on-one job status meetings, I was better able to understand what he was thinking and how I could lead him more effectively. I realized I needed to initiate change more slowly, offer more opportunities for feedback, and give him time to adjust. All of these things have helped him to be more comfortable with change and more productive in our office environment.

## Esprit de Corps (Navy)

Esprit de corps is defined as "the common spirit existing in the members of a group and inspiring enthusiasm, devotion, and strong regard for the honor of the group."<sup>11</sup> Leaders are responsible for the emotional health of their organization. Capt. Fluckey was a great leader and his crew had great spirit.

Families frequently sent presents to the captain for him to give to their sons at Christmas time. One family sent a record of a sailor's younger sister singing Christmas songs. When the sailor came in for breakfast, the captain started the record. After the first couple words the sailor recognized his sister's voice. The captain confirmed it was his sister and then read the letter from his family. Capt. Fluckey took the opportunity of the gifted recording and the heart felt letter to build up and encourage the entire crew.

During World War II submarines were a common sight entering and exiting the largest US port in the Pacific, Pearl Harbor. But on Capt. Fluckey's final departure on a war patrol, everything was different. All of the battleships, carriers, and other ships were signaling their messages of "Good luck" to the Barb. Capt. Fluckey noticed that his crew were enjoying the moment a bit too much so he looked around and saw "From the high periscope flew a four-by-five foot blue flag embossed with large white letters: 'Fluckey's 8th Fleet'. Embarrassment overwhelmed me.... What to do with a crew whose enthusiasm I couldn't hold a lid on?"<sup>12</sup> Capt. Fluckey was always careful to be humble around his peers because he did not want to provoke

professional jealousy. In this case boasting of having “fleet-like” accomplishments was too much outward pride, even though he appreciated the pride within the ship.

On another occasion, one of Capt. Fluckey’s men asked him for a big favor. He wanted to see the action from the conning tower, “topside,” so he would be able to tell his wife about it. His usual responsibility was in the control room, one story down, as diving officer. Capt. Fluckey really relied on his work as diving officer, but he agreed to the proposal and switched assignments for the next time there was a night surface attack. That action resulted in ten of twelve torpedoes hitting their targets and six ships sunk - the Barb’s most successful day.<sup>13</sup> Capt. Fluckey’s crew were cross-trained and ready for people to do multiple jobs so he was able to accommodate this request. The whole ship celebrated, but one sailor had a once in a lifetime memory.

### **Esprit de Corps (Library)**

In the library, a great leader creates an environment where people outside the organization want to work and the people inside the organization want to come to work. Some ideas, which can be done in a wide variety of libraries, include:

- Provide comfortable office furniture
- Have a break room with a refrigerator, microwave, and a mix of single and group seating
- Celebrate birthdays either individually or once a month
- Celebrate milestones like promotions or years of service
- Celebrate completed projects
- Have student worker appreciation potlucks at the end of the year
- For smaller offices a leader can treat the staff to lunch
- Mix it up so there is always something on the calendar
- Ask your staff what kinds of events, celebrations, and work environment would be

If you are not personally gifted in this area, you can delegate some of this to a social committee to plan events and ask for input from others on what they would enjoy.

### **Communicate Hard Truths (Navy)**

Capt. Fluckey knew he wanted rockets on his submarine on its next patrol, and he had a particular target in mind. The Barb’s refitting at Pearl Harbor was brief, but Capt. Fluckey convinced everyone from ordinance, operations, intelligence and ultimately Admiral Charles Lockwood that he should have the only rocket launcher in Hawaii, 100 rockets, and his desired patrol area. The Admiral concluded, “You’ve done your homework well. Every turn I make, I find your backers. So be it... You have your wish.”<sup>14</sup>

In the middle of an attack, Capt. Fluckey criticized his Executive Officer, saying that the periscope should only be exposed for four and a half seconds, just like they had trained, and that there was some fumbling for the button which was wasting time. The officer immediately agreed and lowered the periscope more quickly from then on.<sup>15</sup> This exchange has two important pieces of information. First, there was an underlying trust and respect, which meant Capt. Fluckey could speak urgently and abruptly without worrying about how the hard information would be received. Second, he appealed to an agreed upon standard for performance.

## Communicate Hard Truths (Library)

Academic library leaders need to be able to talk to deans, vice presidents, presidents, and board of trustee members with confidence and urgency about the vision, status, and needs of the library. Sometimes top administrators focus on putting out fires and your library does not have any fires, so you drop off the list of areas needing attention. If your library is not being discussed due to a lack of problems, a good leader will keep the library on administrator's minds by communicating vision, new opportunities, and how the library can be part of the solution for other campus problems. Likewise, they need to be able to communicate with their peers about consortial commitments, staffing, budgets, changes in priorities, and new opportunities.

Communicating hard truths to my staff is challenging. Annual reviews should not be a time to reveal bad news. It should be a time to summarize the good and bad news from the whole year. Have regular meetings, monthly or quarterly, to discuss goals, expectations, accomplishments, and needed improvement. Write things down. Writing in advance can help you organize your thoughts and be sure to say all the things you think are important. Taking notes and writing up a summary of a conversation gives you documentation of what was covered and when. Communicating more information, more frequently means difficult conversations will not come out of the blue. Good leaders also need to get over the hurdle of wanting to be liked by their staff. Leaders have to say hard things that is why you are paid the big bucks.

## Leaders Think Big Thoughts (Navy)

Thinking big thoughts is an area where visionary leaders can be distinguished from effective managers. Capt. Fluckey was a visionary leader because he thought big thoughts. He studied successful commanders who went before him and he thought about the challenges he faced. He thought about smaller challenges like where the enemy was hiding its ships as well as bigger challenges like how submarines could shorten the war.

Regarding enemy ships, he laid out the most detailed chart he had, plotted the locations of all the sightings of enemy ships, and realized ships had to be using a shallow channel which could not support shipping unless it had been dredged. He contacted SUBCOMPAC and they confirmed it had been dredged. With that information he identified a port which would probably be full of enemy ships, but it was over an hour inside the ten fathom curve, which is less than sixty feet of water. It took forty-seven feet of water to get the periscope below water level so they could not safely submerge for over two straight hours. Capt. Fluckey asked the captain of another submarine to join the Barb in the attack, and that captain said, "Drop dead."<sup>16</sup> The Barb went in, sunk four large ships and ran.

To shorten the war, Capt. Fluckey worked on an idea which he called harassment. He summed it up this way: "Basically, for harassment to be effective, it must force the enemy to raise the level of his defenses in all areas, countering the lone Barb effort."<sup>17</sup> The way Capt. Fluckey harassed was by launching rockets – a first for a submarine – and a foreshadowing of today's nuclear missiles launched from submarines. His attacks were so successful the Japanese military and the American press thought an invasion of the Japanese mainland was underway. Top US Admirals were embarrassed at press conferences because they could not answer questions about all of the ships the Japanese reported attacking them, but it was just one ship, the Barb, trying to shorten the war.<sup>18</sup>

## Leaders Think Big Thoughts (Library)

These are challenging times for libraries. We are not at war, but some people feel under siege. Some libraries are facing budget cuts, others have had flat budgets for many years, some libraries are under a hiring freeze or cannot get new positions posted, and still other libraries are losing space as higher level administrators decide to move other employees, offices, or restaurants into the library. And those are just the things I have experienced. We need visionary leaders to figure out what our patrons need today and in the future. There are lots of experts saying lots of things, but the leaders will be the ones who understand the past and correctly guide their organization toward the future.

I have been struck by the difference between visionary leaders and managers. Libraries need both leaders and managers, but the top library position, whether director or dean, should be a visionary leader. Managers optimize within the lines of what has been done in the past. Visionary leaders understand the past, but go beyond it, when necessary, to a future outside the lines. When managers have time they do something. When visionary leaders have time on their hands they think. They wrestle with the future of the library.

This difference was driven home to me last year when I walked into my boss's office one day and he was just sitting ... looking off into the distance. He said he was thinking about the following:

- What information do students need?
- How many physical books does the library need?
- What should the library do with its space? Collections? Services?
- What new services should the library offer?
- What is the proper balance between collections and services?
- What needs does the campus have which are not being met?
- How much of the library's budget should be spent on informational resources and how much on non-traditional services?

The answers to these questions are going to be different for different institutions. Each leader needs to think these big thoughts in order to evaluate the opportunities and challenges before them and make decisions that will best serve the students and faculty of their institution.

One practical area where we can see good library leadership is in how libraries have responded to the long term decline in traditional library services. Across the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) from 1991 to 2015, initial circulation statistics are down 58%, and reference transactions are down 77%.<sup>19</sup> Has staffing in these areas also gone down proportionally? Does the library have growth areas into which staff or open positions can be shifted? Across the ARL, library staffing has been reduced 20%.<sup>20</sup> At the Tennessee Tech library, public and technical services departments have been reduced to less than half their peak staffing, and positions have been shifted into library systems, archives, tutoring, and testing. Other academic libraries have branched out into institutional repositories, maker spaces, student success librarians, and expanded special collections.<sup>21</sup>

Another area for big thoughts and leadership is the physical space inside the library. While research libraries may not have reduced their physical collections significantly, many universities and colleges which rely on electronic resources could reduce the footprint of their physical collections. This new space could become a learning commons, study rooms, presentation rooms, new services, or new locations for existing campus services which facilitate student success.

## Conclusion

Whether we like it or not, the collections, services, and spaces in the library are changing. Library leaders can guide these transitions or sit back and wait for higher level administrators to make the decisions for them. I do not have the answers to the big questions, but I can tell you that the libraries which best navigate these times will be led by visionary leaders. The library world needs leaders who:

- Select team members who add intelligence, experience, and build up team members
- Cross-train staff so sickness, extended leave, and departures do not interfere with the library's productivity
- Respect the individual staff members by leading them according to each one's temperament, needs, and future plans
- Build esprit de corps making their library a place people want to work
- Communicate hard truths to top administration, peers, and staff
- Think big thoughts

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanine McKenzie Allen, "The 'Volunteers' of Spritz's Navy," in *A Big Anthology of World War II U.S. Submarine and Historic Stories*, ed. Paul W. Wittmer (Manchester, MO: P.W. Wittmer Publications, 2010), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene B. Fluckey, *Thunder Below! The USS Barb Revolutionizes Submarine Warfare in World War II* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 201.

<sup>3</sup> Jeanine McKenzie Allen, "The 'Volunteers' of Spritz's Navy," in *A Big Anthology of World War II U.S. Submarine and Historic Stories*, ed. Paul W. Wittmer (Manchester, MO: P.W. Wittmer Publications, 2010), 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Myron Alexander, "Finally, a submarine home of my own!" in *A Big Anthology of World War II U.S. Submarine and Historic Stories*, ed. Paul W. Wittmer (Manchester, MO: P.W. Wittmer Publications, 2010.), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Robert B. Lander, "About the S-37," in *A Big Anthology of World War II U.S. Submarine and Historic Stories*, ed. Paul W. Wittmer (Manchester, MO: P.W. Wittmer Publications, 2010), 160.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene B. Fluckey, *Thunder Below! The USS Barb Revolutionizes Submarine Warfare in World War II* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 343.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>11</sup> Merriam-Webster, "Esprit de corps," Accessed April 29, 2018. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/esprit%20de%20corps>.

<sup>12</sup> Eugene B. Fluckey, *Thunder Below! The USS Barb Revolutionizes Submarine Warfare in World War II* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 317.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 238-250.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 352.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 387.

<sup>19</sup> Association of Research Libraries, "Service trends in ARL Libraries, 1991-2015," accessed February 27, 2019. <https://publications.arl.org/ARL-Statistics-2014-2015/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> L. Dempsey and C Malpas, "Academic Library Futures in a Diversified University System," in *Higher Education in the Era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, ed. N. Gleason (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 86.