Ocean Leadership

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President's Corner

Leadership and Integrity in High Winds and Heavy Seas

It seems like just yesterday I was a young Naval officer and senior forecaster at sea having to stand my ground in the face (and I mean, literally, *in the face*) of an irate admiral who wanted me to change my weather forecast and associated new transit route to support his desire to arrive at our destination on schedule, seemingly at any cost. It was one of the most nerve-wracking and disparaging moments in my 32-year career in the Navy — which I certainly thought would be much shorter at the time. One thing that made standing my ground marginally easier was the knowledge that I had the full trust and confidence of my immediate bosses in the chain of command. If needed, they would support my science-based assessment of the weather and sea conditions in any ensuing interactions with the admiral on this topic. Fortunately, that wasn't needed, and the right operational decisions were made based on the science-based work of expert meteorologists and oceanographers supporting me, at sea and ashore. Had I caved to the admiral's wishes and changed my forecast to serve a senior individual's needs, there is a very real chance that damage to the ships and injuries to fellow sailors would have occurred.

Having experienced a situation like this, I empathize with what many employees and leaders at NOAA and its National Weather Service are going through right now, as their willingness to stand behind their forecasts and forecasters has been questioned and disparaged, resulting in an amazing amount of media exposure. I have the deepest regard for the men and women of NOAA, and I don't envy the senior leaders who have been forced into a situation where they want and need to support their scientists (with potential repercussions), support their political leaders (with its own set of repercussions), or try to tread a very thin line between the two, as they likely have legitimate concerns for the mission and workforce of NOAA if new, unqualified, and inexperienced leaders are brought in to replace them.

For current and future leaders in the ocean science community, this situation can also be an opportunity to reflect and learn. I believe we must always stand our ground in support of science and scientists while doing our very best to support and inform our own leaders and decision-makers, ensuring that they understand and correctly use these tools to protect and inform the public. But at the end of the day, integrity and virtue must be our channel markers as we chart our course through difficult decisions about what is best for the people and organizations we have the incredible opportunity to lead — which may also require the selfless sacrifice of personal ambitions. What would you do if you were in charge of an organization like NOAA in a situation like this? I know what I would do — the same thing I did 25 years ago. And maybe, just maybe, with effective communication balanced with respect and civility on all sides, a better outcome could be achieved than the one that is still unfolding here.

-Jon
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