



What Would Rickover Do?

By Mark Stout & Larry Chandler

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Admiral Hyman Rickover was quite a man. Considered the Father of the nuclear Navy, he was a man of action, served an inconceivable 60+plus years of continuous active duty (not a typo), and was highly demanding of himself and others. Unaccepting of the Navy's traditional methods, Rickover instead chose to build a world-class organization of his own terms. Sometimes this meant taking his programs directly to Congress, a behavior that earned Rickover enemies outside, but especially within the Navy. Conversely, his naked pursuit of excellence, including nuclear safety, surety, and stewardship, and his programmatic salesmanship also helped cultivate a large portfolio of friends and admirers. It has been Rickover's accomplishments--his major and enduring impact on the nuclear Navy--that have created and sustained an interest in his opinions and ideas.

In a 1982 speech Rickover made at Columbia University that served to culminate much of his thinking, three major actors emerge: the individual, the leader, and the organization. These are then knit together by an overarching Rickover theme regarding the importance of knowledgeable leaders, individual responsibility and the tendency of large government organizations to dilute individual responsibility. Both the actors and the theme are relevant, first because of Rickover's nuclear background and ideas relate directly to current Air Force efforts to "revitalize" its nuclear enterprise, but also because of the transcendent nature of his thoughts. Most of Rickover's Columbia speech text is at govleaders.org.

The Individual

Rickover felt each individual needed to feel a sense of ownership and have a corresponding sense of loyalty for high achievement to occur. Ultimately, individuals accomplish things and to do so, they need to possess competence, continuity, and commitment. When an individual has direct personal involvement in an endeavor's success or failure (and when they know it), Rickover felt superior performance was much more likely to occur. Conversely, poor performance is more likely when responsibilities are unclear. Similarly, when an individual's responsibility and their authority are *generalized*, unexceptional (or worse) performance can be expected.

However, without individuals doing *the right things*, organizations fail. While this is self-evident to most of us, it is a lesson worth considering in prioritization, because Rickover suggests a general human tendency towards performing 'little tasks' (which may be interesting, or even urgent, but are ultimately unimportant). And why is this so? He suggests human nature often nudges us towards the sorts of "challenges" that really require little effort or energy, but still seem to provide some sort of internal sense of accomplishment. If less important things are being pursued, even if they are being done well, the individual will fail to accomplish the organization's mission.

The Leader

Rickover knew leaders had to have more than symbolic value. That is, an organization's leaders needed to go beyond vaguely being "in-charge" or replying "I'm the commander" when asked "What do you do?" Rickover warned against generalist-leaders, "often unskilled in the technical aspects of the company." Instead of having a profound understanding of the technical and operational issues, Rickover understood generalist-leaders might not possess the comprehensive understanding of the mission and that without this essential knowledge, could well face a too-tempting inclination to focus issues that are easy to measure, administrative, or even urgent but are not related to the mission. Rather, Rickover called for leaders to help fulfill the essential role of having individuals working on the aforementioned "right things." Rickover would propose that those who depend exclusively on staff, slides, or software to understand what's going on are likely to lose touch, or restated, he felt that filtering can kill a leader's ability to lead a complex organization as it strives to accomplish its mission

Rickover also felt strategy, policy, and doctrine, while interesting and important, can be distracting as they can serve to crowd out painful, difficult, and generally unglamorous tactical detail and mission-related work. Rickover, working in a complex, dynamic, and interconnected environment, found resolving small issues and details was necessary or these difficult endeavors would fail. He argued there is no substitute for a leader's experience and knowledge, and a profound corporate memory will be a beneficial natural consequence of those two strengths.

As with the individual, a leader's authority and responsibility must be matched. Responsibility to the mission comes before all other obligations, to include personal ambition, achievement, and comfort. Rickover said the person who says or thinks 'I'm not responsible' is correct; the person is being *irresponsible*. Conversely, Rickover saw when "everyone's responsible," no one's responsible.

The Organization

Rickover indirectly posits that organizations should exist to provide a framework that helps individuals complete the mission through unity of effort. However, Rickover was a contrarian who favored self-organizing and opposed hierarchically-driven institutions. In today's language, Rickover could be described as advocating for natural work groups (or teams) or self-managing teams. He used a condemning phrase to describe a systemic organizational flaw he too often observed, which provided organizational leaders the latitude "to do less than is necessary."

He provided organizational assessments that were troubling in 1982 and remain of concern today. Rickover opined the traditional DoD process created unintended consequences which generated institutional and personal inexperience and nonaccountability, and that by the time the individual or leader had well grasped their job, it was time to rotate out. Radical change, like designing, building, and operating nuclear-powered carriers, cruisers, and submarines, did not and does not come easy, and organizational flaws certainly add to the challenge. Rickover's nuclear Navy organization is still remarkably successful because individuals and leaders are required to expertly know their business.

Rickover in Retrospect

You don't serve over 60 years without garnering some high-level attention and when Rickover pinned-on his fourth star, President Richard Nixon had this to say about him, "...once genius is submerged by bureaucracy, a nation is doomed to mediocrity." In hindsight, it's not difficult to see that Rickover's "genius" was based largely on the Edisonian proposition of hard work: that is, one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration. The perspiration was no doubt an acceptable trade-off to Rickover, a man who had lived through two world wars, wars in Korean and Vietnam, and the Cold War.

These experiences placed Rickover as a man who clearly understood the value of the nation's nuclear deterrent force that he worked so diligently to enhance. Evidence of this was shown at Rickover's memorial service in 1986. There, former President Jimmy Carter read the John Milton poem *On His Blindness* to honor Rickover. The poem concludes with the line "...They also serve who only stand and wait." While standing and waiting do not appear to parts of Hyman Rickover's basic character, they well describe the importance of diligence, preparedness, and readiness he ascribed to of America's nuclear deterrent force.

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