

Lessons in Management from a British Naval Officer

by

Cliff Williamson

If you feel that you are sometimes waging war in your day-to-day business affairs, it makes perfect sense to look to a war hero for examples and guidance. For today's CEO or business manager, there is much to be learned from C.S. Forester's Horatio Hornblower series. Captain Hornblower shows how to lead, how to fight, and how to win.

Horatio Hornblower is the fictional British naval hero who sails the seven seas at the time of the Napoleonic Wars. In a series of 10 novels, we follow the career of this brilliant and curious officer. Loosely patterned after the real-life history of Admiral Lord Nelson, the series follows Hornblower's career from midshipman - the lowest ranking petty officer- to Admiral and Lord in command of the Atlantic fleet. The setting is roughly from 1790 to 1820, mainly on the high seas, and touching shores in almost every part of the world.

The detail and historical accuracy of Forester's work is so engaging that we can get a fascinating glimpse into a time when naval captains were some of the most remarkable and dynamic characters of the period. As absolute dictators of their ships, with the power of life and death over their crews of up to 600 men, Naval Officers navigated their vessels to the ends of the earth with amazing skill and accuracy. They used wind and muscle for power, stars and hand-held sextant for navigation, hourglass and a knotted cord called a lead to measure distance and velocity, and cannon shot, cold steel, and the Articles of War to enforce their will.

With a whisper, they could send hundreds of men up to dizzying heights above the decks to set sail in storm or dead of night. They could order men to certain slaughter in broadside artillery duels when a wound of almost any kind meant gangrene, amputation, and death. If time allowed and the whole ship didn't go down, these unlucky men were wrapped in their hammocks with a cannonball at their feet and dropped overside into the icy deep.

Apart from their impressive skills in sailing, these captains knew weaponry, spherical trigonometry, astronomy, and geopolitics of the moment. With Europe and the world in turmoil, countries switched allegiance with incredible frequency. Any careless act such as the omission of a dip of the flag could precipitate an international incident.

These same captains were often wine connoisseurs, gourmet cooks, avid researchers in biology or botany or the other sciences, readers and writers of great literature, accomplished musicians, and geniuses in their own right. Some, on the other hand, were raving lunatics, sadists, or fools, merely lucky enough to have made the right contact to gain promotion to a position of absolute power.

In the case of Hornblower, his career begins most inauspiciously. First, he gets seasick while his ship is still at the port, and this causes him great embarrassment for many years. Later the first vessel under his command - a prize taken from the French – sinks beneath his very feet. Carrying a cargo of rice, the hapless vessel takes on water through a shot hole hidden below the waterline. The soaked rice swells in size until the seams of the ship literally split apart. From this and other misadventures, he learns his hard lessons and moves on to fight brilliant battles and gain stunning victories.

By reading about his experiences, we too can learn many lessons. By the final three books of the series, Hornblower has proven many times - to himself and to the world - his bravery, his competence, and his good judgment. Particularly in these three last books, there are many rich examples of great leadership. References in the "*Lessons*" which follow are taken from Admiral Hornblower, an omnibus edition comprised of the last books in the series, printed by Penguin Books. Here are a few examples of leadership, Horatio Hornblower- style.

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- **Get out to see your people at work.** Long before Tom Peters in his "*Search for Excellence*" advocates MBWA (Management By Walking Around). Hornblower has learned and applied that managerial strategy. When he goes out to inspect his ship, he puts several men on the spot with tough questions on what they would do in various emergencies. He is less interested in the polish and shine on the brass cannons than in the men and their morale, which he refers to as his *human weapons*. (page 390; page 707) Hornblower demonstrates loyalty to his crew and expects loyalty in return. (page 668)
- **Reward excellence and exceptional work swiftly, personally, directly.** Hornblower knows the effect not only on the one being rewarded but also on the morale of the entire crew when due recognition is given. Share the glory, what little of it there may be. Hornblower gives credit where it is due and even artfully makes his subordinates feel they are responsible for some of his very own ideas. It costs him nothing and builds the courage, competence, and future capabilities of the crew. (page 394; page 606). The reverse is also true. Punishment should be swift and firm. He says, "...delay in matters of discipline defeats its own object. (page 565)"
- **Seek ways to turn problems into opportunities.** Seize upon fortunate circumstances and favorable coincidence. If for example, there is a nasty problem to be solved, spend those resources required to solve it, but find a way to make the outcome even better than what existed before the problem occurred. Hornblower, for example, goes out to

quell a mutiny, and in doing so, manages to recapture a British Indiaman, pardons the lives of the more innocent mutineers, and invades the port of Le Havre (page 425).

- **State your wishes directly, briefly, clearly, as a command, leaving no doubt as to what you want.** Allow flexibility in finding means to achieve the mission, but make the desired outcome crystal clear (page 404). Neither encourage nor permit unnecessary chatter. When you give an order, expect it to be obeyed immediately.
- **Do not underestimate the importance of close cooperation between all parts of the force.** Hornblower frequently calls all his officers together to outline his plans. He allows them to add their ideas and suggestions, and synchronize watches. He knows that this kind of cooperation shares equally in the importance given to the choice of action being carried out (page 451). A brilliant plan - poorly executed – is a poor plan after all.
- **Maintain a strong sense of duty and honor.** In those times, the honor of a gentleman was not just important; it was *the most important* (page 588). Hornblower does not choose his actions based on what is easy or difficult. Says Hornblower, “Do not enter into desperate adventures in a light-hearted spirit, but do not turn your back on such causes if they are worthy ones (page 513).”
- **Waste not a moment.** If the wind is right, and the mission clear, there is no better time to begin than now.
- And finally, perhaps more wise than any other is Hornblower’s quick reaction to his steward, who determines to marry a likable French girl who can cook all manner of delicious dishes. When the steward suggests that perhaps his Marie could return to Smallbridge and serve Lord and Lady Hornblower, Horatio is delighted, but answers that - on such matters, of course - Lady Hornblower would have to be consulted (p 502). You figure it out!

Where do you stand on leadership? Could you as a leader call your crew of 600 to “clear for action,” and in 5 minutes have every single employee in position, properly equipped, aware of his or her duty, and at the ready? Can you instill in your staff a “sense of duty,” which will bring them to put the organization first over personal self-interest?

Today’s managers and CEO’s do not have the Articles of War or the threat of 200 lashes around the fleet with which to motivate our crews, nor should we wield this kind of power. But we do need to find ways to make our organizations respond to our will. A clear vision is not always sufficient. I offer the example of this fighting Naval Officer as an inspiration on how to lead, and how to make your vision a reality.

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