

Be Technically and Tactically Proficient: A U.S. Navy Leadership Principle

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One question I like to pose to leaders—current or aspiring—is, “Why would anyone follow you?”

After some uncomfortable silence, a few possible reasons emerge, and they typically fall into a few categories. People generally follow other people who:

- Have legitimate authority due to their position or title,
- Control rewards or punishments,
- Are likeable role models,
- Demonstrate competence or
- Some combination thereof.



Demonstrating competence, therefore, is one of the sources of power from which leaders can influence other people’s behavior and attitudes. It’s not everything, but expertise matters. As listed in the [U.S. Navy’s Leadership Principles](#), “Be technically and tactically proficient.”

Here are all 11:

- 1 Know yourself and seek self-improvement ([read more](#))
- 2 Be technically and tactically proficient**
- 3 Know your people and look out for their welfare
- 4 Keep your people informed
- 5 Set the example
- 6 Make sure the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished
- 7 Train your unit as a team
- 8 Make sound and timely decisions
- 9 Develop a sense of responsibility among your people
- 10 Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities
- 11 Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions

From my experience, being technically and tactically proficient is fundamental to leadership because even if you’re in a leadership position, you can’t forget about the technical aspects of what you or of what your people do. One of your primary jobs as a

leader is to make decisions (or facilitate decision-making, depending on the situation), and to do that effectively, you need competence. Furthermore, if you're going to evaluate other people within your area of expertise, being competent yourself is essential for your credibility.

Developing proficiency may take a number of forms, but there are a few general implications for leaders or those who want to lead:

First, dig into the details of what your team, department or organization actually does. Ask around and find out who the subject-matter experts are, and then spend time with them. Learn from them. Read the documents that pertain to what you do. These may be strategy documents, white papers, policies, or procedures.

Second, become an expert regarding the key processes that matter to your team. For example, if you work in a larger (read "more bureaucratic") organization, you'll be a much more effective leader if you can be the go-to expert on how things get done—how resources get allocated, how to create a new position and hire people for it, how to find training opportunities for your people, and more.

Third, find a specific area in which you can truly develop expertise. In this my early days in the Navy, for example, this could take the form of shiphandling (i.e., driving ships, particularly in tight areas like alongside a pier), weapons systems, or engineering. In a functional area such as human resources, this could look like developing deep expertise in recruiting, talent analytics, onboarding, or any other myriad areas.

The point is that by developing proficiency, you'll boost the power and influence that comes with expertise, making you a more effective leader. You'll be better equipped to make decisions, and you'll have more credibility among those whom you lead. Because without proficiency, without that foundation of competence, you'll find that your people will continually be frustrated with your lack of knowledge. After a while, they may stop bringing issues to you, resorting to working around your incompetence to get work done.

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