

Down Periscope:
Funny Lessons in Servant Leadership

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Once you are aware of servant leadership, you see it in a lot of places. I see it in the movie *Down Periscope*, a 1996 film starring Kelsey Grammar, Rob Schneider, and Bruce Dern. It is such a good-hearted, funny movie, that it doesn't bother me that it is occasionally silly and clichéd. I like stories in which the underdogs are good guys who win against overwhelming odds. I like stories in which people grow and change. I like stories in which people celebrate and are loyal to each other. I like stories that have humor. And this movie has all those things.

The only drawback, from my point of view, is that like far too many movies today, it has some profanity in it—not a lot, but some. I guess that shouldn't surprise us too much, since it's about sailors, and legend has it that they set the standard for swearing. But there is so little profanity, I wonder why there had to be *any*.

The strength of the movie is that in the midst of the fun, it has some simple but important messages about leadership—indeed, about servant leadership. Here's the background, and five lessons on leadership that we can learn from the film.

The Story

The story is about a rag-tag crew in an old diesel submarine that wins a war game against a big modern nuclear submarine and a fleet of ships and airplanes, all with vastly superior equipment.

Kelsey Grammar stars as Tom Dodge, a Lt. Commander in the U.S. Navy. Dodge graduated third in his class in submarine school and is tactically excellent. But Dodge is also a maverick, and earlier in his career his submarine brushed against a Russian missile submarine off Murmansk, not something to his credit. He has been turned down for command twice already. His career is going nowhere.

As the movie opens, he is up for command for the third time. At that meeting, Admiral Graham, a two-star admiral and the bad guy in the movie, tries to finish Dodge's career by arguing that he should not be given command of a submarine. Graham says that Dodge is impulsive, reckless, and even undisciplined. He also points out that Dodge has a tattoo on a part of his body that really should not have a tattoo.

But Admiral Winslow, a three-star admiral who outranks the bad guy, is willing to give Dodge a final chance to prove his worth. Winslow devises a war game to test the U. S. Navy's harbor defenses. He assigns Dodge the *USS Stringray*, a diesel submarine commissioned in 1958 and then recommissioned for this exercise. It's a rust bucket.

Admiral Winslow knows that the Russians are selling some of their old diesel subs. He is worried that the Russian subs might be purchased by an enemy of the United States. Winslow wants to know if a non-conventional captain, a renegade captain, a terrorist with a diesel sub, could slip past the Navy's defenses and get a nuclear warhead into a U.S. harbor.

Dodge is assigned the task of being that non-conventional, renegade captain—one rebel diesel against the U. S. nuclear navy. “Don't think by the book, think like a pirate,” Winslow tells him.

Dodge's first challenge is to slip into Charleston harbor and launch a flare to prove that he got in undetected. His second challenge is to get far enough into Norfolk harbor to torpedo a dummy ship that Admiral Winslow has set up near the entrance. Winslow says that Dodge will have succeeded if he can torpedo the dummy ship before being caught—before his submarine is targeted in what is called “a shooting solution.”

Admiral Graham, the bad guy, wants Dodge to fail. So he hand picks every strange or difficult member of the submarine corps he can find, and assigns them to Dodge for the war game. Furthermore, Graham decides to assign a woman officer, the diving officer, to the submarine as a “trial program” to see how well a female officer can work with men. As the movie begins, we sense that all the cards are stacked against Dodge—he just can't succeed. No way.

But Dodge does succeed, not just because it's a feel-good movie, but also because of the way he leads his crew of "losers and rejects." Here are five lessons for servant-leaders that we can learn from the film.

Lesson One: Accept the situation and the people you are given.

Lesson one is to accept the situation and the people you are given. Rather than criticizing and complaining, commit to the people you have and bring out their best.

When Dodge is taken to his submarine, he is extremely disappointed. And when he first meets his crew, he is almost bemused. He can only shake his head. This is not the command he has dreamed of. This is closer to a nightmare. He can barely believe it.

But Dodge makes a crucial decision: He decides to accept the situation and the people that are given to him. He knows he has been given a very old submarine and a very difficult assignment. But he accepts the challenge. It brings out his best. And he knows he has been given an unusual crew, but he accepts them, too, in a way that brings out *their* best. He doesn't harangue or criticize the crew or show any disdain for them. He accepts them. He teases them, and shakes his head at them, but he accepts them, *and they know it*. When Dodge becomes committed to them, they become committed to him. Soon, it is clear that they will follow him anywhere—to the bottom of the ocean, and outside the zone of operations, and through the twin propellers of an oil tanker.

In case we miss the point, we are given the contrast between Dodge and his Executive Officer, Marty Pascal, played by Rob Schneider. Right after boarding their crew for the first time, Marty comes to see Dodge, and tells Dodge that he wants to transfer out, because serving with this crew will ruin his career. Marty says the crew members are awful, the most incompetent crew in history. Dodge tells him "we're all in this together." He tells Marty that both their careers are in the hands of all those awful crew members. Dodge accepts that fact; Marty never does. He remains critical and condescending. The crew knows it, and they don't like him or respect him.

While he accepts the crew, Dodge knows that he needs to draw out the best in the crew. He learns what the crew members can do—he takes advantage of their talents. He gets the athlete in the crew to climb the

conning tower in the dark and rain when they need to string up some lights. He gets the sonar officer to imitate whale songs when they need to mislead a nuclear sub.

Dodge is cheerful, but he is willing to confront Stepanek, a crew member who needs confronting because he is not giving his best. Stepanek is determined to get into trouble so he can go to the brig and get out of the whole thing, and Dodge won't let him. Later, when the sub starts to leak badly, it is Stepanek who fights the torrent of water and closes off the leak, saving the vessel. "Now that was fun!" he says after he seals the leak. At another point, the woman dive officer, Lt. Lake, wants to give up, but he won't let her. Dodge accepts the strangest crew in the Navy, but then works hard to cajole, inspire, and bring out their best. And he succeeds.

This is a good message for all of us as leaders. We should begin by accepting the situation and the people who are with us. Complaining usually doesn't change the situation, and haranguing usually doesn't change the people. It is especially important to accept the people, and get to know them, and learn about their desires and abilities, so the group can build on that. Servant leaders develop their colleagues. That's exactly what Dodge did.

There's an old saying that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. As leaders, we need to send the signal that we accept the others we work with. We accept them, we care about them, and we may challenge them, because we believe in what they can do. That is really the only way to build a team and achieve the team's best possible performance.

Lesson Two: People who don't want to be part of the organization or its mission should be helped to find another organization or another mission.

Lesson two is a hard one: People who don't want to be part of the organization or its mission should be helped to find another organization or another mission.

Marty Pascal is the executive officer who is so condescending and keeps haranguing the crew. He learns that Admiral Graham, the bad guy, has changed the rules of the war game to make it harder for Dodge and the *Stingray* to succeed. Graham cuts the geographic area of the war game in

half, so it will be easier for the nuclear navy to find the *Stingray*. Dodge ignores this, deciding to stick with the original orders from Admiral Wilson, who outranks Graham. But Marty is very upset that Dodge is not following the revised orders. So Marty goes to Dodge and says that he wants to take over command of the *Stingray*.

Dodge lets Marty use the PA system to address the crew— basically, he lets Marty try to take over the sub. He lets the crew decide. The crew, however, wants nothing of Marty. Nobody supports him. So Dodge informs Marty that he has just mutinied. The crew dresses up as pirates, plays a dirge, blindfolds and binds Marty, and literally has him walk the plank. When he steps off the plank, he falls into the netting of a fishing boat whose owner has agreed to take Marty back to shore. Nobody gets hurt, and Marty is removed from the crew.

I think this is tough, especially in volunteer organizations. At some point, however, one person should not be allowed to distract or weigh down the group so badly that the group cannot reach its goals. I am thinking specifically of people who constantly complain, argue against everything the group decides, and just kill morale all the time.

If there are people in your organization or committee or team who just don't want to do what the organization has decided to do, you need to sit down with them, tell them that you respect their views, but the group has made its decision. Since they are not happy with that, perhaps they need to find other work. It is good to argue and discuss and debate during the decision-making stage, but once the decision is made, it is important to move together with as little “drag” as possible. Otherwise, no decisions get implemented, and the group gets nowhere.

Lesson Three: Good leaders help team members learn and grow and gain in experience and confidence.

Lesson three is that good leaders help team members learn and grow and gain in experience and confidence. The best example in the movie is Lt. Lake, the female dive officer.

Lt. Lake is highly qualified and well trained, but she is reluctant to risk going to the next stage— the deep end. When it comes time to sail between the propellers of the tanker, Dodge wants her to do it, because he

knows she is good enough. But she declines. So Dodge takes over. However, he intentionally does it badly, hoping that she will step in and take over to save the *Stingray* from disaster. At the last minute, she steps in, barks out the right orders, and successfully leads the crew through the highly risky maneuver. In the process, she built her self-confidence and increased the crew's respect for her.

Do those served grow as persons? Dodge coached and mentored and teased and helped the crew grow. He unleashed their energy and intelligence, and they performed at higher and higher levels.

Lesson Four: Good leaders celebrate.

Lesson four is that good leaders celebrate. Dodge allowed spontaneous celebrations after each success, and planned the celebration after they got into Charleston harbor and set off the flare. They dressed up as pirates and flew the skull and crossbones from the conning tower. In the last scene, when their torpedoes hit the target, they break out into a spontaneous dance. When they come ashore, they are headed for a night on the town, and Dodge says they deserve it. Each step along the way was celebrated.

My experience is that we don't do enough celebrating. Perhaps we are waiting for the ultimate, big win. But we need to celebrate along the way. Celebrate every milestone, every achievement. It could just be applause during a coffee break, or a funny award, or something playful, but the idea is that we are making progress, we are doing good work, we're not done, but we're on the way. Intrinsic motivators are much more powerful than extrinsic motivators, and so it is about celebrating the meaning and the skill and the progress. You don't have to hand out bonuses or prizes.

Lesson Five: Good leaders are loyal to their team members.

This brings me to lesson five, the final lesson, which is that good leaders are loyal to their team members. This is the most moving part of the movie for me.

After successfully torpedoing the dummy ship at Norfolk, the *Stingray* comes back to port. When the crew disembarks, we see them in their dress white uniforms for the first time. They march down the pier in formation, with their heads held high, totally transformed.

Admiral Winslow meets them on the pier, and as they all stand at attention, he offers Dodge the command of a brand new nuclear Seawolf class nuclear submarine, and a whole new crew— a crew that Winslow says will be commensurate with Dodge’s tactical and leadership ability. But Dodge declines unless he can bring the *Stingray* crew along with him. He says that he would not be worthy of the promotion were it not for his current crew. He was ready to turn down the dream of his entire career, rather than abandon his team— a ragtag group of weird people who under his leadership grew and developed and became the team that beat the U.S. nuclear navy, against all the odds. Winslow says okay, he can keep his crew. And off they go, to celebrate.

So, summarizing the five lessons, a servant leader accepts the situation and the people she or he is given. If there are people who don’t want to be part of the organization or its mission, the servant leader helps them to find another organization or another mission. Servant leaders help team members learn and grow and gain in experience and confidence, and servant leaders celebrate along the way. Finally, servant leaders are loyal to their teams. Those are all things that Captain Dodge did, and they are all things that we need to do, too, to be our best as servant leaders.