

The 'Critical Skills'

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The Naval Academy experience has prepared us well for life as civilians in the business world. That a Naval Academy graduate should be apprehensive about his or her prospects following military service as an officer is surprising to me.

Over the course of the last couple of decades, I have had the opportunity to meet with and evaluate individuals from a wide range of educational and experience backgrounds seeking executive positions. More recently, I have spent much of my time visiting with Academy graduates who are beginning their careers after the Navy—from junior officers to flag. These discussions have centered around the prospects of career opportunities in the business world following the Academy experience and years of Naval Service. Many pointed questions resulting from these conversations focused on a singular issue:

What kind of skills do I need to acquire to qualify me for a key position in a good company in the 'real world'?

Besides the obvious answer . . . "It depends on what kind of work you want to do or career you want to pursue . . .," there are ways to examine this issue by looking at the kind of skills one needs in order to be successful at anything.

Recently, a study was conducted of some 900 executive searches that had been conducted by major corporations seeking executives for key positions. These positions were "First Level Capstone" positions—not the Chief Executive Officer's job, but positions that represented the first real measure of success in the corporate world. They included positions such as Vice President-Finance, Vice President-Marketing, Partner in an accounting firm, and the like. The equivalent position in the Navy would be "Command at Sea."

Looking at the skill sets—or position requirements—for each of the capstone positions involved clearly pointed out major differences between career paths. But when all 900 searches were combined in an effort to determine what skills each held in common with the others, five "Critical Skills" quickly emerged:

Communications—getting ideas out of your head and into the heads of others—either

through speaking or writing. This includes the ability to listen and receive ideas from others.

Analytical Skills—being able to take a lot of information, sort out the relevant facts, develop findings, draw conclusions, and make recommendations. It is the ability to determine "What all the stuff means." This is the logical thinking process.

Production Skills—being able to 'make something happen.' To take something from the idea stage to the product stage. It can be as simple as wanting to make a float for a Homecoming Parade and then doing it, to something as complex as getting Iraqi soldiers out of Kuwait.

Teamwork Skills—being able to work effectively as a member of a team in a collective effort to solve a problem. Being able to contribute ideas to the group; getting ideas from others; giving credit to others where it is due; getting credit for your own contributions. In essence, the goal of an effective team member is to be recognized as a valued member of the team—not necessarily as the team leader!

Time Management—the ability to set priorities and manage your time. It is the typical problem of having ten things to do in the day—four are critical—and no one is going to tell you what four are most important. You have to figure it out—and you have to be able to get by on the other six. (Remember Plebe Year . . . ?)

The results of this research were verified in a report released in April 1992 by a special commission of the US Department of Labor—the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). This report articulated the skills necessary for individuals to pursue any kind of career and were nearly identical to the "Critical Skills."

On the surface, these "Critical Skills" and the skills identified by SCANS were not too surprising. After all, they describe with some clarity what any effective executive—or senior Naval Officer—must have in order to be successful.

But the implications for individuals pursuing careers in corporate life are profound:

It really doesn't matter what college you attend or what you choose as a major field of

study—as long as you attend the kind of institution that challenges your intellect, you major in something of relevance and interest to you, and you concentrate on learning the "Critical Skills."

In your first job, it makes little difference what you do or with whom you do it as long as you do the best you can and concentrate on the "Critical Skills."

With the "Critical Skills," you might have a chance to be considered for a Career Capstone Position; without them, your chances of reaching such a position are severely limited.

During the course of a career, the "Critical Skills" become even more important the higher one progresses in any kind of an organization. They are essentially the core qualifications of a chief executive officer! I suspect that they describe quite clearly the skills used regularly by senior flag officers.

Recall, for a moment, what it takes to successfully complete the Naval Academy educational process and then follow that with several years of service as an officer.

The life of the junior and senior Naval Officer involves the practical application of the "Critical Skills." Our technical specialties—whether in submarines, Navy air, surface line, supply corps, etc.—are simply the environments in which we go about our business practicing the "Critical Skills."

So what do these "Critical Skills" mean to individuals who are in various phases of their Naval Academy life and afterlife?

For the Midshipman—

They represent the core of your education. It matters less what you choose as your major—major in something that you like and in which you can excel. Take advantage of every opportunity you have at the Naval Academy to practice the "Critical Skills." You will learn your technical specialty well during your Naval career; post graduate school will give you the technical expertise you need. (. . . and hope that you had a good Plebe Year!)

For the Junior Officer completing the obligated service—

Trust that the Academy and your Naval Service experience have taught you the "Critical

Skills" and have given you the strong underpinnings you will need to find your way around the corporate world. Practice the "Critical Skills" in all that you do. You will need them throughout your career.

For the career Naval Officer close to retirement—

Trust that the "Critical Skills" will serve you as well outside the Naval Service as they did during your Naval career. Your technical specialty will most likely have narrowed your choices somewhat on the outside, but your "Critical Skills" will be applicable anywhere. Rely on them.

Upon reflection, it seems that the Naval Academy has served and continues to serve you well!

So what is all the apprehension about when getting out of the service?

Perhaps it is that you try to seek some sort of relevance between our military experience and

its direct applicability to that first civilian job. Certainly, the experiences you had in the military are important and the technical skills you learned will eventually serve you well; but the hope that there will be direct applicability—or for that matter, *that some corporate personnel executive will recognize the relevance—is wishful thinking.*

The relevance of the specific military experience doesn't really matter anyway, so don't spend any time worrying about it. Even if serendipity is your guide, the "Critical Skills" you learned as a Midshipman and practiced as a Naval Officer will overpower most shortcomings in technical or functional business skills that others seem to have in abundance in the business world. You will learn the relevant business skills on the job.

The Naval Academy has given you all the *civilian salt* you will need to meet the competitive challenges of the world *over the wall.*

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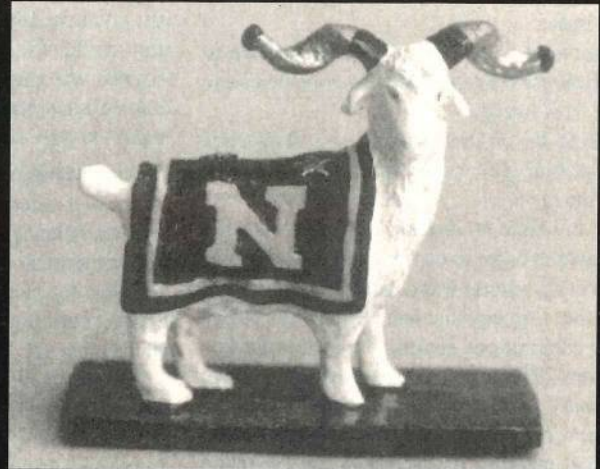
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