

Running Reactors, Leading People

Part II — The Human Side of Reliability

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The Reactor Never Lied

One of the things I appreciated most about nuclear power was its honesty. The reactor never had a hidden agenda. It never played politics. It never cared who received the promotion or whose idea won the meeting. It simply reflected reality. If something wasn't right, the indicators would tell you. Not eventually. Immediately.

People are different. Organizations are different. We become remarkably skilled at hiding reality. Departments protect themselves. Leaders soften difficult messages. Employees learn which subjects are safe and which are dangerous. Meetings become performances rather than conversations. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, perception replaces truth.

That is where organizations begin to fail. Not because people stop working. Because people stop telling each other what is really happening.

Reality Is a Leadership Skill

Over the years I have come to believe that one of the rarest executive competencies is not strategic thinking. It is the willingness to face reality before reality forces itself upon us.

Every struggling organization leaves clues. Declining trust. Lower engagement. People speaking less. Innovation slowing. Meetings becoming quieter. High performers leaving. These are organizational instrumentation. Just like reactor gauges. The question isn't whether the signals exist. The question is whether leaders are paying attention.

Humility Keeps You Alive

In nuclear operations, overconfidence was never considered a strength. It was considered a warning sign. The most respected operators weren't the loudest. They weren't eager to prove how much they knew. They were curious. Disciplined. Deliberate. They checked each other. They welcomed questions.

They understood something profound. Experience reduces mistakes only if experience continues learning. The day someone believes they have nothing left to learn is the day they become dangerous.

I've carried that lesson into every leadership position I've ever held. The smartest executive in the room isn't necessarily the one speaking. Sometimes it's the one asking the best question.

The Checklist and the Conversation

Procedures kept reactors safe. Conversations kept people safe. Those two ideas aren't interchangeable. You can follow every process perfectly and still create a culture where people are afraid to speak. Likewise, you can build a warm, supportive culture that lacks the discipline necessary to deliver consistent results. Exceptional organizations refuse to choose between humanity and accountability. They insist on both.

I've spent much of my career in learning and development, helping organizations prepare people for the future. Early in my career, I believed training was about transferring knowledge. Eventually I realized it was about building confidence. People perform better when they understand not only what to do but why it matters. Compliance may produce consistency. Understanding produces commitment. There is an enormous difference.

The Quietest Voice in the Room

One habit followed me from the submarine into every conference room I ever entered. Watch the person who hasn't spoken. Not because they are disengaged. Because they may be thinking. Some of the most valuable ideas I've ever heard came from people who spoke only once during a meeting.

Many leaders unintentionally reward speed. Quick answers. Fast opinions. Immediate solutions. Yet thoughtful leadership often emerges from deliberate reflection. Stand-up comedy taught me to respect the pause. The Navy taught me to respect the quiet professional. Together, they taught me something unexpected. Silence isn't empty. It is often where wisdom is forming.

Training for Judgment

Technology changes. Markets change. Artificial intelligence will continue changing how we work. But one responsibility remains timeless. Developing judgment.

Organizations frequently ask whether employees possess the right technical skills. That is an important question. A better one may be this: Can they think when the unexpected happens? Reactors don't reward memorization. They reward disciplined thinking. Leadership is no different. The future belongs to organizations that teach people how to reason, not simply what to remember. Knowledge has a shelf life. Judgment compounds over time.

Every Leader Creates a Culture

Whether intentionally or not. Every meeting. Every email. Every difficult conversation. Every promotion. Every response to failure. Leaders teach people what is truly valued.

If mistakes are punished, mistakes become hidden. If questions are welcomed, learning accelerates. If curiosity is celebrated, innovation follows. Culture is rarely created by slogans hanging on walls. Culture is created by repeated behavior that people observe every single day.

Long before employees believe the mission statement, they believe what leaders consistently do. That's why integrity isn't merely an ethical virtue. It is an operational necessity. Trust, like reactor

reliability, is built one disciplined action at a time.