

# 3 Lessons from a Naval Officer by B. J. Armstrong

## **Leadership is as important as strategy.**

Buried in the tomb below the United States Naval Academy chapel lays Captain John Paul Jones. After his heroic naval victories, and his letters about professionalizing the infant service, he is frequently named as the spiritual father of the United States Navy. However, the modern sea service's intellectual father was Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan—a teacher, mentor and strategist who helped found the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island.

Mahan believed in teaching officers about leadership and foundational skills for making hard choices. Strategy was important; however, none of it mattered if those men weren't ready to command and lead their organizations in challenging times. Here are three of the key lessons that Mahan sought to instill in leaders he taught:

**1. Leadership is an art, not a science.** In his book *Naval Strategy: Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land*, published in 1911, Mahan compared naval officers to artists. He wrote that artists had to learn certain techniques, mediums and skills, but that wasn't what made their artwork great.

In the end “art, out of materials which it finds about, creates new forms in endless variety.” Artists take those foundations and then mix and match them based on inspiration and experience to create a masterpiece. He continued that “art acknowledges principles and even rules; but these are not so much fetters, or bars, which compel its movements aright, as guides which warn when it is going wrong.”

**2. Prepare for success by knowing your past.** Mahan once wrote, “Heedlessness of conditions, or recklessness of dangers defeats efforts everywhere.” He believed that a leader required sound planning in order to attain victory. Proper planning, in Mahan's view, required knowledge of history—a leader must know what has worked in the past in order to determine what might work in the future.

In Mahan's view there were two ways to truly learn how to lead, through personal experience or from “the experience of others, written for our use.”

This applies in business as much as it applies on the quarterdeck of a ship at sea. If a leader doesn't know the mistakes other companies in their sector have made, or understand their own organization's past, the result will be a poor foundation for decision-making. Leaders have to make decisions with incomplete knowledge, and understanding the past, the history, will help fill in those gaps with credible estimates.

**3. Avoid the administrative mindset.** In his first published article Mahan wrote that a focus on science, engineering and administration tended “to promote caution un-duly; substitute calculation for judgment; [and] create trust in formulas instead of trust in one's self.”

Mahan understood the importance of administration and logistics. Administration is required for the successful operation of a navy, and for the smooth running of any organization. However, Mahan reminded his students that “the one test of naval administration is not the satisfactory of economical working of the office, as such, but the readiness of the navy in all points for war.” He wanted his students to always keep the central mission of their organization at the forefront of their mind. The protection of their rice bowl or the minutiae of the paperwork would only lead them astray.

## **Learning from Mahan**

Today's leaders from all sectors, whether private or public, can learn solid lessons from past military thinkers.

In the 21st century we are all tempted to think that our challenges are new, our businesses are revolutionary, and our organizations are disruptive, but as the great thinker Bob Marley once said, "In this bright future, you can't forget your past."

By following Mahan's advice on the importance of treating leadership decisions as an art instead of a hard and fast science, using the study of history to learn through vicarious experience, and understanding the pitfalls of an administrative focus, you have the tools to become a stronger leader, better prepared to face today's challenges