



Rear Admiral Ralph E. Suggs, USN (R)

Captain of His Ship

Carrier commanding officer and retired rear admiral, United States Navy, and Harley-Davidson senior executive

Leadership is about relationships. I don't care if you're the captain of the carrier USS *America* or a Harley-Davidson executive. It's about being able to articulate and communicate a vision that's shared. Everyone has to understand the leader's vision, and then it becomes about overachieving. I grew up in the sticks of North Carolina on a dirt road down in Columbus County. Other than my parents, my mother particularly, the person who influenced me the most was my granddaddy. When his health deteriorated, I had the opportunity to run his farm. He respected people and I'll never forget this. He told me, "Don't ever abuse employees. Without them, we wouldn't have an opportunity to provide a living for ourselves or for them." I've never forgotten that, and it was that, his integrity and overachieving, that influenced me. Later as the captain of the aircraft carrier USS *America*, I had an opportunity to call up some of those core values. I was very lucky; I had my choice of captaining three great carriers—the *John F. Kennedy*, the *Kitty Hawk*, and the *America*. I chose the *America* because she was in her last deployment and would be at sea the most, be in a position to be in harm's way. Plus, her call sign was COURAGE. That came with a lot of responsibility and was one hell of an honor, and I took it that way.

Very soon, I faced a career-defining leadership moment. Shortly after taking command, we had a major boiler explosion which did about five million dollars in damage. Once I found out my troops were okay and I'd looked at the damage, knowing that she was only scheduled to make one more deployment, I knew somebody was going to have to make a very tough decision, even though Bosnia and the Adriatic issues were out there and they really needed this warship. But were they going to spend that kind of money? Well, here's where the leadership comes in. A preliminary investigation had called it human error, slammed the crew. This proved to be unfounded, and then the JAG report came out, which absolved all of my crew from any wrongdoing; the boiler itself was an accident waiting to happen. So Vice Admiral "Sweet Pea" Dick Allen asked me a very basic question: "Can you do it, make this ship seaworthy?" And thanks to him, I had a very interesting leadership moment. I said, "Yes, hell yes," then Admiral Allen allowed me to stand in front of that crew, a group whose hearts were broken, sailors who'd been out to sea for months, and tell them they all had an option. They could accept their fitness reports, which would go up to the day before the mishap, and leave the *America*. Those who left would go to onshore duty. Then I said, "If you decide to stay to make this ship battle worthy, well, like my granddaddy used to say, 'You better be prepared to get your asses off the porch and run with the big dogs!'" Then I gave them a weekend leave to think it over. On the following Monday morning there wasn't a single sailor who left that ship. Now, we worked our tails off, overachieved, painted the ship ourselves, and this baby's 1,100 feet long, has 110,000 parts. When we finally brought her out to sea, she looked like a brand-new '55 Chevy.

Some very proud, overachieving sailors were on board. In a very short time the *America* was selected by General Schoomaker over several other carriers to take his special operations troops into Haiti. Again, vision, commitment, and overachievers. We were selected because we were willing to take the *America* closer to the proposed target, a bit risky in a claw-like coral bay harbor just off Haiti, but we weighed the risks against rewards, and the rewards were substantial. We were going to save seven to eight minutes in helicopter flights from the carrier to the mission. And, as General Schoomaker said, "That could be the difference in life and death to one of my Rangers." That was a successful mission, and later not only did *America* win the Battle Efficiency Award, which is the best carrier out of six carriers on the East Coast, she got the Battenberg Cup, which is given to the best ship in the Atlantic fleet. Now, if it hadn't been for that "big dog" approach, the vision for this ship, and the leadership and trust and commitment of men like Admiral Allen and General Schoomaker, none of this would have been possible. They put everything professionally and personally on the line because they believed in a few thousand men and their crazy skipper. I believe there are some basic points to leadership—vision, passion, determination, a sense of humor. But there's one more, the most important. It's your heart. The heart is the X factor of leadership.