I relieve you. With these three simple words, military commanders across the globe follow a centuries-old, time-honored tradition, when responsibility and accountability for their commands are seamlessly transferred from one to another. The concept of command rests on a foundation of leadership that individuals learn and practice, and that they succeed and fail at time and again. This circuitous path starts from the day officers enter their particular services.

While the qualities that make up this ethereal concept called leadership have been debated since time immemorial, the only true litmus test of its success is the crucible of combat. While preparation can be months or even years in the making, lives depend on a calculus often made in terms of seconds. When commanders are ordered to take their units into harm's way, senior officers expect those individuals to exercise authority and command over their men and women and lead them in accomplishing the mission. When lives are at stake, command is unequivocal and demanding.

Immediately after the al Qaeda terrorist attack on the USS Cole (DDG-67) in the Yemeni port of Aden on 12 October 2000, the crew succeeded in keeping the ship afloat. Several crew members also saved lives, based largely on their ability to exercise leadership from the lowest level up the chain to the commanding officer. I inherited a great ship. As with any commanding officer following a change of command, I set out to put my stamp on how I expected not only the crew and ship to perform, but myself as well. In my command philosophy and other documents, I clearly spelled out standards of performance and goals for the crew.
Five Key Components

After a career in the Navy unfortunately defined by the attack, I would say that leadership can be distilled to five key components: integrity, vision, responsibility, investment, and competence.

Integrity defines leadership. It is the number-one principle and reinforces the foundation of the U.S. Navy and the other military services. Commitment to doing what is right for the ship, the crew, and the Navy, regardless of the consequences, must be unwavering. If not, failure will inevitably follow, since unit cohesiveness will degrade and morale will suffer. In the worst case, people will be wounded and killed in action. Without uncompromising integrity, failure becomes the natural default to success.

Vision defines how a commander expects to accomplish the mission. Know the capabilities of your ship and crew. A commander is always expected to know where to guide the crew, from daily maintenance of equipment, through preparations for deployment, to the stressful buildup and execution of combat operations. This vision must be clearly articulated to the crew. If they are going to be expected to possibly risk their lives in defense of their country, they deserve to know why and how you, the commander, intend to use them and ensure their safety to the greatest degree possible.

Personal responsibility and accountability starts with the individual and spreads to the unit. The only person responsible for his actions is himself. Instilling a sense of responsibility for one's actions also has the side benefit of developing a sense of ownership in one's profession and job. While a leader may set the tone for a unit, as a sense of responsibility and accountability develops, the crew feels trusted to set their own standards of performance.

To trust and invest in those you lead is the clearest demonstration of your confidence in not only your Sailors but your ability to lead them. When you trust and invest in your people, you give them flexibility to think through problems on their own. The confidence of commanders to allow subordinates to fail is the key to success. Nothing teaches leaders better than understanding failure and how to deal with it. Out of failure, true leaders inspire others by persistently picking themselves up by their bootstraps and trying again.

Learning, however, is also a measured risk. The time to learn is not when the trigger is about to be pulled, but during the countless hours invested in mastering skills and honing their use in a
broad and ever-expanding number of situations and scenarios. In time, these skills form the long-term foundation of a person's experience. More important, they happen on and off duty. Through experience, crew members become competent and skilled without oversight and guidance. At the same time, trust and the investment in learning fosters a sense of pride and teamwork as individuals teach others what they, too, can accomplish.

The Way to Success

Professional competence defines how a leader completes the mission. It encompasses not just technical knowledge but the ability to lead and inspire subordinates. And it can usually be quantified and measured by the accomplishments of the command. The success of individuals in doing their jobs in a technical sense is measured in five simple ways:

- **Job Description.** People want to clearly understand their job. It is the responsibility of the commander to ensure the scope of the work to be done is clearly articulated and explained.

- **Standards of Performance.** It is the commander’s job to explain how well the job should be done. There is a big difference between giving people a set amount of time to accomplish their jobs versus demanding the job be done to perfection. Rarely will those two standards meet.

- **Training.** Provide the knowledge to understand and complete the job. This comes through schools, on-the-job training, reading, and watching others complete a task until individuals have the ability and confidence to do it themselves.

- **Tools.** Provide whatever it takes to do the job right the first time. The tools necessary to complete a job vary depending on the assignment. They can consist of physical implements, such as mechanical equipment and tools, to more mundane items such as computers and administrative resources that staffs use to effectively and efficiently convey information to senior decision makers.

- **Time.** Provide enough of it based on the circumstances surrounding the work and the experience of the individual doing the work.
The instant the Cole was attacked, the crew was thrust into battle conditions and circumstances that, while trained for, could not have been imagined by even the most experienced Sailors. Power was lost in the forward two-thirds of the ship; the general announcing system for the ship was inoperative, and the battery backup failed to work; alarm systems for the ship were rendered inoperative, and no one knew the status of any compartment or space on the ship regarding flooding, smoke, or fire.

In those vital first seconds, all the leadership and training tenets laid out in the command philosophy and practiced for months crystalized into actions to save the ship and wounded Sailors. The crew immediately responded to the first priority: save the ship. The crew knew their jobs and went to their general-quarters stations. Without direction, they formed small-unit damage-control teams that located damage, worked to control flooding, and communicated back to the repair lockers as they were being manned.

Other Sailors rushed to general quarters stations in the forward part of the ship, which was without power and in the dark. Recognizing their situation, they took the initiative to leave those stations and subsequently migrated to the aft of the ship to form the core of the medical triage effort, working to save their shipmates.

Within minutes, command- and damage-control structures were quickly reestablished. Within hours, the ship was stable, and the wounded had been evacuated to local hospitals. While many challenges remained in the days to come, the crew knew they had been tested by combat and had the confidence to deal with any adversity that would come their way.

A Remarkable Feat

When the Cole sailed from Norfolk, Virginia, two months before, the crew had accomplished a feat that had never been done in the Navy and has yet to be repeated. A 100 percent qualified all-enlisted crew manned the sea and anchor detail and sailed that ship safely out of port to start the deployment. While this was a unique accomplishment in its own right, it had a far greater impact.

With almost 20 percent of the crew killed or injured, the crew of the Cole unhesitatingly stepped in to fill leadership, medical, and damage-control positions without anyone telling them what to
do. These actions did not occur of their own volition. They came from a crew who knew what they were supposed to do, how they were supposed to do it, and with the confidence to do their jobs despite the extreme conditions just suffered after the devastating terrorist attack.

While many can debate what forms the basis of leadership, as the commanding officer of the Cole, the tenets of leadership put in place and practiced over the previous 15 months proved themselves under combat conditions. Every crew member counted toward saving the ship and each other that day; but more important, all of them also acquitted themselves as heroes and leaders in every respect.

Commander Lippold, the former commanding officer of the Cole, is now an inspirational speaker and serves as an adviser and spokesman for a leading military family advocacy group.