

Graduation, Knowledge, and Leadership

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Thirty-seven years ago, about this time, I graduated from high school. There is nothing particularly extraordinary about this broadly expected milestone except that in my family I was the first to experience it. While there wasn't a corresponding celebration, one could tell there was an elevated sense of pride among our family. Being a pretty good student, I think there were some decent options for continuing my education, but I really didn't understand how it all worked or could work for me. College seemed a foreign world.

A persuasive recruiter kept telling me about opportunities in the nuclear Navy and I agreed to some additional testing, eventually enlisting at 17. The training was hard for me in almost every way, including being away from home. I had never even attended a summer camp. Although I grew up in a state contiguous to the ocean, I had never seen it. One day in boot camp in Orlando, Florida, I remember being on the fourth floor of a building attempting to discreetly look out the window hoping for a glimpse of the beach. Everybody knows you can't see the ocean from Orlando, but I didn't. Basic training was followed by a series of schools known as the nuclear power training program. I struggled mightily. Because of the considerable confidential information involved, the course materials could not be taken from the building, meaning that after-hours study must be done on-site and under constant supervision. At one point, I was told I had set the program record for the number of hours in the classroom. These extra hours were after the regular full school day, daily physical training, cleaning, inspections, uniform prep, watch-standing, etc. The curriculum assumed a base line of knowledge and study skills that I simply did not have.

The point of this very abbreviated story is to encourage all of us in leadership roles to look beyond the diploma to identify work ethic, curiosity, ambition, and commitment vs. just knowledge or lack thereof. Ignorance is often frustrating, but it may simply be the result of one's own unavoidable circumstances. Look for those characteristics that, once knowledge is attained, can take your team much further than just information alone. I'm so very thankful for the patience, time, and opportunities afforded me by so many generous leaders since that graduation many years ago. Congratulations to all the graduates and their families celebrating academic milestones with the Class of 2024 including my Anna Jones. ■