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"Unleashed – How to Thrive as an Independent Professional"

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CAPTAIN'S PERMISSION REQUIRED

EPISODE 90

Will Bachman:

I was a young Ensign, newly qualified as Engineering Duty Officer. When I went to the Commanding Officer of my submarine to ask, "Captain, request mission to conduct work in the vicinity of energized gear." Hey, welcome to Unleashed, the show that explores how to thrive as an independent professional. Unleashed is produced by Umbrex and I'm your host, Will Bachman.

Certain evolutions on a submarine require the permission of the Duty Officer. Some evolutions require the permission of a more senior officer; Engineer Officer or sometimes a Weapons Officer or the Operations Officer.

The evolutions with the greatest potential risk require the permission of the Commanding Officer. At the time, as a young Ensign, I didn't reflect long on why I had to go to get the captain's permission. It was just another precondition like making sure that the plant was at the right temperature or pressure, or that the technicians had the procedure in hand. Only later did I realize that the purpose behind requiring a CO permission was to teach young officers like me how to ask the right questions.

So, back to our example we started this episode with, my first time as Engineering Duty Officer, asking for permission to work in the vicinity of energized gear. I had been briefed by the Chief Petty Officer from electrical division on the maintenance the petty officers were going to perform. And I read the procedure, and I ensured that we had all the danger tags in place, and we met all the other initial conditions. So, I figured I was set. I felt ready to brief the captain.

I went up to the Captain's stateroom, knocked on his door and when admitted, I asked for permission to do the work. I guess I was pretty proud of myself. I was recently qualified as an Engineering Duty Officer. I'd gone through six months of nuclear power school, six months of prototype, three months of submarine school, and then five months of intense study and under constructional watches onboard the ship. Now, here I was on my own doing

real submarine officer stuff, getting approval for some serious, important maintenance, making it all happen.

"Who's going to be the safety observer?" Asked the captain? "I don't know, sir. But I'll find out." I replied. "Okay. Is the corpsman on board in case someone does get shocked?" "I don't know sir. But I'll find out." "Okay. Instant Bachmann, what are your plans if we lose short power while this work is in progress?" "I hadn't considered that sir. But, I'll speak with the engineer and the Chief and come up with a plan." "Great. Why don't you get answers to those questions and come back to me."

Now, I was totally embarrassed feeling like an idiot. I went and found answers, and I returned to report what I had found to ask permission again. "Have you personally inspected the safety area?" "No sir." "Well, do you think that would be a good idea?" "Yes, sir." "Okay. Have you confirmed that the calibration on the meters the electricians will be using hasn't expired?" "No, sir." "Okay. Well, we had a problem recently where we did some similar maintenance using some meters where the calibration had expired. So we had to go and redo it. You might want to check on that." "Yes, sir."

So, I went off again, and I inspected the safety area, and had the Chief confirm to me that all the meters were in fact calibrated. I made a couple of more trips to see the captain and finally that day we did get permission and the work got done.

If you think that's the next time I asked for captain's permission, I was totally buttoned up, you would be wrong. The next duty day I had, I had asked for permission for men to work in an enclosed space. In other words, a tank that we had drained and opened up to do some maintenance. For this, there was a whole separate set of questions. "[inaudible 00:04:02] Bachman, how long are we required to ventilate the tank before we can send workers in? How long has it been ventilated? Have we taken air quality readings? What are the safety observer requirements while the men are in the tank? Who's going to do the close out inspection?"

It wasn't the most pleasant experience to respond with a series of, I don't know, but I'll find out, sir. But eventually, I learned to anticipate the questions that Captain would ask and get those answers before I went up to see him the first time.

What were the questions I learned to ask? I'll give you a few of them. Number one, why are we doing this maintenance in the first place? Who ordered it to be done, or what procedure requires it? Number two, what outcome do we expect to achieve? Number three, who is going to be involved? Who is supervising? Who is actually doing the work? What other watch standards need to be informed or involved in some way? Maybe it will affect the readings they're taking their logs. Maybe they need to stay out of the area.

Maybe there's an increased risk of a fire, so they need to be on alert. Do we need any other support on hand, such as rad context to monitor radiation levels? Do we need to inform other members of the crew? How about other ships? How about squandered?

Number four, the procedure? Do we have a procedure? Has everyone read it? Do they understand it? Is the procedure the most up to date version? Number five, have we met all the initial conditions? If not, what are the exceptions? Do we have danger tags hanging to ensure that the equipment is isolated and won't get energized while the technicians are working on it? Or exposed to high pressure steam or high pressure air or high pressure oil or moving parts?

Number six, do we have all the tools and equipment that we need? Are the tools calibrated? Are they on hand? Are the workers wearing the right clothing for the job? For example, for electrical work, they need to remove their belt, their jewelry, and metal. Number seven, are there any warnings? And what do they say? Number eight, does this maintenance affect anything else that's going on? Something some other division is trying to do at the same time?

Number nine, how could this go wrong? How could someone get hurt? Is there a risk of fire? For example, are we doing some welding on a deck plate, and in the lower level, just blow that deck plate there's lube oil or oily rags that could catch on fire? Is there risk of flooding? Is there risk of someone getting crushed by moving equipment? Is there risk of radioactive contamination? How do we prevent those things from going wrong? If they do happen, what action will we take?

Number 10, is this a smart time to do this particular job? Are the workers alert and rested, or are they tired? Have they been up for two days? Did the worker have duty the night before staying up from midnight to 6:00 in the morning on watch? If they're working for lunch, through lunch, have the cooks been asked to save some plates of food?

Number 11, have I personally put my own eyeballs on the job site? It's great to talk to the Chief and look at the paperwork, but there's no replacement for going and taking a look at it. Like Yogi Bear said, "You can see a lot just by looking."

I guess, that was the point of requiring Commanding Officer permission. It was to teach young officers how to begin to think like a commanding officer. For the more straightforward maintenance evolutions, the Navy could give us junior officers a checklist of preconditions that didn't require a ton of thinking. If those conditions were met, it was safe to proceed.

So, the procedure allowed even a young untested Ensign with just six months on board the power to start the job. For maintenance or other evolutions that

had a higher possibility of equipment getting damaged, or people getting injured, or something else going wrong, the procedure writers could not anticipate every possible scenario. So, we actually had to be taught how to think.

Since we arrived on board with only low or moderate ability to think, the procedure writers inserted that precondition, Commanding Officer permission required as a mechanism to teach us to think. Have you had to ask for permission or have you given permission? I'd love to hear your experiences. You can email me at unleashed@umbrex.com. If you sign up on our website at umbrex.com/unleashed, you can get the weekly Unleashed email, which includes transcripts of every episode, including this one.

If you thought anything in this episode was interesting, I would love it if you'd share it with a friend or on social media, and thank you for listening.