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# Liberty or Doughnuts?

## A Behavioral Journey

By Gail Snyder

**K**enny Comeaux's story of involvement in behavioral science is unique for many reasons, not the least being that his interest surfaced both above and below water. Comeaux, now a former submarine officer, entered the United States Navy straight out of college. After completing initial training and attending Nuclear Power School (NPS)—a requirement for submarine officers—in Charleston, South Carolina, his first fleet assignment was a three-year stint on the USS *Rhode Island*, a sub operating

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— Kenny Comeaux

out of Kings Bay, Georgia. “I guess my thoughts on leadership started to grow when I was on the *Rhode Island*,” Comeaux explains. “There are many great leaders in the United States Navy, but as with any organization, you have a few supervisors where leadership may not come as naturally as it does for others. I saw a lot of what I considered to be really great leadership and some not so great leadership. When I saw something I didn’t like, I’d think, ‘I’m going to make a mental note not to do that.’ At that point in my career, the subject of leadership really started to interest me.”

The typical career path for U.S. Navy officers consists of a regular rotation: three years at sea followed by a two-year shore assignment, and then back to sea. Comeaux reported to his first shore duty as an instructor at NPS. “I wanted to make a difference in NPS. I wanted to take some of the lessons learned on the *Rhode Island* and hopefully make some positive changes at the school,” he remembers. With that goal in mind, Comeaux began searching for audio books concerning leadership that he could listen to while running—a favorite off-duty pastime.

### A “COINCIDENCE” OF CONSEQUENCE

Some argue that there is no such thing as a coincidence, but that’s what Comeaux calls the fact that in his search for leadership material, he came across Aubrey Daniels’ *Bringing Out the Best in People* on the Navy’s e-learning Web site. “Listening to that book was a pivot point, an epiphany for me,” Comeaux says. “I started to realize, wow, we’re doing things completely wrong! We have the wrong idea about what we need to do to motivate people to do their jobs, to be happy about what they’re doing, and to come to work wanting to do their jobs as opposed to feeling like they have to.”



This former engineer officer confesses that the epiphany also hit him at a personal level. “It made me reflect on who I was as a parent. It’s not like I was an overly negative parent, but it changed my perspective on how I treated my kids. Up until that point, I had a tendency to focus on the negative. Today, I think I’m a much better parent as a result of applying these methods at home,” he says.

But Comeaux didn’t want to restrict his application of Daniels’ positive management methods to his private life; he wanted to see if he could actually improve the performance of his division. He recalls thinking, “*The principles in this book are really amazing but what can I do to apply them at work? How can I make things more positive?*”

### OBSERVING THE PROBLEM

At this point, Comeaux began to observe the workings of his department from a behavioral perspective. He discovered that even seemingly benign practices actually focused on negative rather than positive performance and pitted instructors against one another. One example in particular stood out. At NPS, seven to eight instructors taught approximately 300



students over a period of 3½ months. During this time, five major exams over the material were issued. The instructors then faced the arduous task of grading each and every one of the exams in one day.



“It took us 8 to 10 hours to grade all of these exams. At least the students got immediate feedback,” explains Comeaux. But the instructors got immediate punishment. It was part of the job, but to add to the punishment, the instructor whose students scored lowest at each grading period had to bring in doughnuts for everyone else at the next grading period. “It was all in good fun but you always seemed to see the same people bringing in the doughnuts and the ‘rock stars’ of the group never had to do any of that. It shined a negative light on what was wrong and didn’t address the question of how can we improve the performance of these guys whose students aren’t doing as well?” remarks Comeaux.

Being in the military, he knew that he couldn’t offer any additional compensation or tangible awards, but upon investigation, he learned that he could offer a short amount of time off. “I could give them one day off at a time. Everybody likes to go home, and that was about the only leverage I had,” he recalls. His next challenge was to devise a system that didn’t force people to compete against one another, but instead encouraged instructors—even the “rock stars”—to improve their own individual performance.

was basic, positive, and encouraged improvement of skills at the same time. He simply told his instructors that at the end of the next grading period their students’ performance would be measured against that of the previous grading period. “I said, ‘I want to see an improvement in your teaching performance, not compared against each other, but against yourself,’” Comeaux says. His plan included a weighting factor that took into account the variance in student ability. Also, constructive feedback came via instructor sit-ins. The entire command, including Comeaux’s division, regularly observed the teaching techniques of their peers by periodically attending one another’s classes. This helped them identify areas for improving their own teaching skills and an opportunity to provide feedback and reinforcement to one another.

“We knew where we had areas to improve. It’s just do you have the incentive or the motivation to get there instead of just coming to work every day, getting the job done, and doing just enough to say that I did my job for the day?” Comeaux explains. His plan for eliciting discretionary effort included, of course, **positive reinforcement**. The two people whose student grades improved the most each time the material was taught would not have to participate in the grueling grading process. “If anybody wanted a break from anything, it was the grading, so people were extremely motivated to improve on their own performance. They were given time off plus they didn’t have to do something that they really didn’t like to do,” says Comeaux.

As expected, when trying something new, some participant push back occurs, and this was no exception. Comeaux told the naysayers to his plan: “*We can’t make everybody*



### TRYING SOMETHING NEW

Comeaux devised a plan that dismissed highlighting bottom-of-the-barrel performance: a plan that



*happy all of the time, but we're going to do what we can to make things better. Keeping the negative reinforcers in place isn't going to make us better as a division and we have to put some initiative in place to make some changes."* Then he asked them a question: **"Do you want liberty or do you want doughnuts?"** They chose liberty.

### FULL SPEED AHEAD

The push-back didn't last long. *The plan was so effective that students and teachers alike quickly noticed the real benefits of extra effort. The exams scores and pass rates dramatically improved. The failure rate of students was cut nearly in half.* Comeaux worked on his own teaching performance as well. *His difficult subject—nuclear reactor theory—once dreaded for its difficulty, became a top-rated, favorite course of NPS students.*

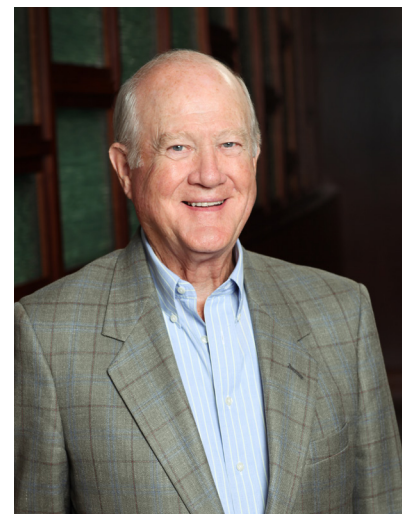
In fact, the department's grades improved so significantly that the command launched an investigation to see if the instructors were cheating. When no improprieties were discovered, Comeaux's department manager talked to Comeaux about his motivation techniques. Comeaux introduced him to the book that had inspired his performance intervention. The department manager told his peers about

the book and soon the entire command was meeting to discuss the behavioral principles of management and leadership. "It made me feel good that it just exploded at that level of the command. I was just a lowly division director doing my thing trying to be a better leader in the United States Navy and all of a sudden it gets all of this upper level attention," he recalls. "It was really a rudimentary application of getting rid of negative reinforcers, putting things in place that allowed people to compete against themselves instead of each other, and providing some positive motivation to get them there."

### ANOTHER "COINCIDENCE"

Comeaux, however, faced a tough decision. His family wanted a permanent home base, so after 12 admirably served years, Comeaux left the Navy for civilian life. As is the custom, his command gave him a portrait signed with good wishes from his division members. The messages contained many positive comments about Comeaux's leadership, but he was particularly reinforced by the message written by his department manager: ***"You really do bring out the best in people. Thank you!"***

The story could end on that positive note, but Comeaux's involvement with behavioral science took yet another unexpected turn. During a job interview at INPO (the Institute of Nuclear Power Operations in Atlanta, Georgia) the company's CEO asked him a question about leadership. Comeaux told him about *Bringing Out the Best in People* and how it inspired his approach



to managing others. The CEO then asked, “Did you know that **Aubrey Daniels** is a board member of INPO and provides lectures to our senior management several times a year?”

Comeaux thought he might be on *Candid Camera*. He landed the job as an INPO evaluator and asked if there was any chance he might attend one of Daniels’ lectures. He then decided to send Daniels an e-mail telling him of his journey in applying behavioral principles. “If I had never received a response I would have been satisfied that I had told him what a difference his book made to me,” he says.

A response did come, however, and in more ways than Comeaux would ever have anticipated. Not only did Comeaux attend Daniels’ next INPO lecture, but Daniels gave him a copy of his most recent book signed with

a personal inscription. Daniels then offered for Comeaux to attend an advanced applications seminar at no cost. He will be attending the seminar this July. “When I sat in on the lecture, I had a smile on my face the entire time,” he states.

Today, Comeaux continues to find ways to use positive leadership at work and home. He also reveals that he has read *Bringing Out the Best in People* several times. “It helps me to get back on track, not to lose my way, because it can be easy to forget those simple truths,” he states. “Revisiting the book keeps me grounded in the world of positive motivation and its principles are going to forever be a part of my life.”

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## [About the Author]

### GAIL SNYDER

Gail Snyder is a staff writer for Aubrey Daniels International. For the past 27 years, she has worked with clients to share their stories of the impact the science of behavior has had on their people and their business. In addition, Gail was the editor of Performance Management Magazine from 1987 to 2004.

## [About ADI]

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