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Recently retired after 43 years of Coast Guard service, I returned in a civilian position as an Organizational Performance Consultant. I don’t do performance consulting because I have the job but got the job because I have continually been involved in implementing quality programs within the Coast Guard… from Total Quality Management, through Baldrige, and on to Six Sigma. I have always sought quality processes to benchmark and flawed processes to correct.

When assigned Director of Auxiliary (volunteers who help the Coast Guard) in 2001, I had the pleasure of meeting a new auxiliarist, Robert Dittman. Quite frankly, his flotilla didn’t know what to do with this ball of energy and asked for my advice. I made it a point to meet the young man and came away impressed with his background, motivation and command of military protocol. To help integrate him into the program, I asked him to be my Auxiliary Administrative Aide. My expectations, quite frankly, were low because, after all, he was blind. Over the next 3 years, he never failed to astonish me in every task assigned. His attention to detail, thorough investigation, and acute insight in all assignments was beyond the vast majority of sighted persons and he proved to be the best AAA I ever had.

A rule of quality leadership is taking care of your people. Robert had some expressed desires and I sought to make them happen. He wanted to go on a ship and I arranged his assignment to the Coast Guard Cutter Dallas for one of their cruises. He was not a passenger, but assigned to duty and assimilated into the crew easily. He was highly touted after the cruise for his work in the communications center, his specialty, and his concern for his shipmates. They, too, had few expectations and were astonished at his performance.

Coming from a military family, Robert was hungry for the military experience. Reminding him to be careful what he wished for, I spoke with the administrators of the Reserve Enlisted Basic Indoctrination course, a three week “mini-boot camp” for newly recruited Reserve members whose experience merited them E-4 or higher and did not need to go through the full recruit training. They agreed to let him fill any last minute vacancies and when a member dropped out two days before the program began, he was offered the billet. He dropped everything and flew to the Cape May Recruit Training Center, with his dog and an E-4 from my office, and formed up in the company. He fully participated in all activities, including distance runs and physical requirements. In the classroom, he would irritate the instructors when he raised his hand. What they knew was coming was an “Excuse me, Chief, but I believe that Section 3.2.a states that you can do this action under certain circumstances.” If their presentation was one inch off the mark, Robert knew the answer and was always correct. Their irritation went to grudging respect and finally to outright admiration. The E-4 sent with him read him test questions for exams since he could not put them into the computer for his JAWS program to read to him. It was a mentoring experience for her and did not inconvenience the course members. He, of course, passed with flying colors and does not even regret the front tooth lost on the pavement after a tumble during a run. He enjoys running enough that he completed the 10 mile Marine Marathon in Washington, D.C. shortly thereafter.

Robert has an extremely keen mind. After attending a Leadership and Management class, he was invited to join the staff and traveled around the United States teaching. At most units, the implied, if not outright stated, comment was, “What is a blind auxiliarist going to teach me, a sighted active duty member.” Without rancor, Robert would tell them and they learned. They not only learned about leadership, but also about not judging a person by external factors.

At a National Naval Officers Association conference a few years back, I heard one of the most striking lines I have heard in my life. The speaker said, “Diversity means being uncomfortable.” While they were speaking along the lines of race, it is also true for the physically challenged. Everywhere Robert goes, people are uncomfortable because he is “different.” He excels at putting them at ease with little jokes about himself, like “I’ll see you later. Oh wait, no I won’t.” He recognizes their discomfort and works hard to put them at ease.

As to the matter at hand, Robert seeks a commission as a lawyer in a military service. The immediate reaction is that he cannot since he is blind. There are, currently, blind members on active duty at the Pentagon. The response to that is they were on active duty when they became blind. Still, they are deemed qualified enough to serve. The exception has been made and a new rule now exists. Blind is allowed if one can show they are qualified.

Robert has shown his ability to make meaningful contributions to the armed forces. He has successfully completed a basic training scenario, served about a ship in a communications center, stood countless radio watches at a Command Center in Corpus Christi, and instructed active duty members in leadership and management. He was a member of the Diversity Advisory Committee for the Commandant and built a personal relationship with Commandant Thad Allen. He has done legal research both for me as Director and for the District Eight legal office, each time with logical and complete findings. In short, he has proven he has a lot to offer and is up to the challenge of being a member of the armed forces.

When Robert applied for law school, he asked me to write a letter of recommendation. In short, I simply said I did not see how he could possibly accomplish it. He cannot read the texts, cannot read the body language of other lawyers, and even sighted persons have trouble completing the courses. I then added that I also do not understand how he could write music and lyrics and make a couple of CDs, be a skydiver, an Eagle Boy Scout, work on computers and communication equipment or run a marathon…but he did. I ended by asking who was more blind…Robert because of his eyes or us because of our lack of vision for him. The same principle applies here. Robert would be an outstanding addition to any military legal staff.

I would be more than happy to discuss him in depth with any who seeks more information.

Sincerely,

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