



Gene M. Seibert, National Commodore

SUBJECT:

Issues for a Better Auxiliary

Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher of the late sixth century, wrote: “Nothing endures but change.” As we look to the future of the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary, this simple phrase still rings true.

Throughout the past year the senior management of the Auxiliary and their support staff has worked hard to understand our environment. We’ve identified major drivers for change and developed well thought-out plans and programs. We’ve communicated our shared vision to the membership.

Examples of our efforts to understand and plan for the future include the *Auxiliary Business Plan* and the district-specific plans, the *Maritime Domain Awareness White Paper*, briefings to the commandant, presentations at flag conferences and district meetings, and articles in *The Navigator* and *On Course*. I firmly believe that these documents, posted at www.auxnaco.org, present a sound and reasoned way ahead.

But, as difficult as it sometimes is to understand our environment and develop intelligent plans, it is even harder to overcome the inertia of the *status quo* and to bring a shared vision to fruition.

As we near the half-way mark of this watch, it’s time we have an objective reality check to see how we’re doing. We want to identify key issues/roadblocks that remain and figure out how to maintain our progress. Rather than go through a list of individual tasks and specific accomplishments, I would like to share a high-level review of key issues and challenges and to solicit your input on how we can continue to move forward.

Your input is important. I know many of you have insights and concepts that can make us better. Some of these you’ve sent forward and they have either been adopted or evaluated and deferred. I encourage and thank you all for your willingness to step forward with new ideas. We understand that different times require different approaches. So if you have a concept that you feel would be beneficial, now is the time to dust it off and send it forward again.

Your chain of communication is the process you should use. For those of you who receive a communication on its way forward, I ask you to pass it on in a timely manner, even if you don’t agree with the concept or the content. Far too many communications get stopped along the way by those who aren’t empowered to make the final decision. You should feel free to add your endorsement as it travels up the chain and, if you disagree, you should say so in objective terms. But please, promptly send it forward in either case.

Overall, I think that we have made real progress in terms of organization and programs. We have reorganized and increased the efficiency of the National and some of the District staffs. We have also integrated various elements of Maritime Domain Awareness into our traditional programs and several new and innovative programs have been developed as well. Nonetheless, much remains to be done before the next change of watch if we are to see our collective vision fulfilled.

From my perspective I think it is useful to group our challenges into two broad classes. These are:

Facing and managing selected cultural challenges and expediting transformation.

Cultural Challenges:

I began by saying, “Nothing endures but change,” but it’s also important to remember another epigram: “The more things change, the more they remain the same.” And, despite our progress, some things have remained the same. Here are some examples:

Program Silos:

In the business plan we recognized the need to increase the efficiency and cooperation of the staff at many levels. More and more of our programs – MDA being a prime example – require an integrated approach. Yet as I travel throughout the country it is clear that “silos” persist. We need to think beyond what a program does simply for the people who will be directly involved and look at the ramifications it has on the Auxiliary as a whole. How does one program affect the rest? Is it worth the cost not only financially but to the organization overall?

The Auxiliary can no longer afford to accept programs and solutions based on less than a system-wide approach. Yes – the program must work and yes, the solution must solve a problem but now, at the same time, it must be considered within the overall context of the Auxiliary.

No longer can we afford an approach based on the hope it will fit neatly and cleanly into the rest of the Auxiliary. We must know how it will affect others and consider whether it is good for the Auxiliary, not just a solution for this particular problem. Since we need to solve our problems multi-dimensionally, new programs and solutions must meet this litmus test: Is this a system-wide solution rather than just solving a single question and does it fit within the Auxiliary framework?

Customer Focus:

Another key objective is to increase the customer focus of the organization and particularly that of the staff elements designed to support the various programs. Included in this objective are measures to simplify the paperwork burden, reduce/rationalize the number of forms, increase the accuracy and timeliness of the AUXDATA system, and provide increased service to the membership.

Yet dealing with the system remains a challenge. For example, the 7030 form (mission activity report) is a one-page form but there are seven pages of instructions on how to properly fill out this form! Time can be recorded under 113 separate categories.

The objectives for creating this form were to increase our ability to capture data on specific missions and to increase the accuracy of our reporting. I'm certain that some (perhaps many) of our members go to great pains to fill out 7030s correctly, but I'm also sure that many opt to use the 7029 form (member activity log) to record their time in a much more user-friendly way — or worse, fail to report their activities entirely. Result: we lose accuracy and completeness of reporting. *I cite these forms as examples of a larger issue – are we making it easier for our members to do their work, or are we part of the problem?*

As another example, we have currency maintenance requirements for our operational programs, which I strongly support. We don't want to have Auxiliarists performing SAR cases that lack recent experience. Yet, we distinguish between time underway as coxswain versus crew. That is, crew time does not serve as a substitute for coxswain time in meeting annual experience requirements for coxswains.

What does this mean to the qualified coxswain without a facility? It means they will lose their qualification unless they can find a facility owner to permit them to serve as coxswain, which means that the other member must have anticipated this need and filled out a box in their facility offer of use form. There are clear opportunities for simplification here.

As a third example, I am concerned about the accuracy of reports from AUXDATA. I believe that our accomplishments are significantly underreported, which denies both the Auxiliary and our individual members appropriate recognition. We are working to develop a simpler system, tentatively called the EZForm. It's being beta-tested now and could lead to direct entry at the FSO-IS or individual member level.

Prayers in lieu of Plans:

As noted above, we have spent considerable time in analyzing our environment and developing a reasoned way forward. I am concerned that we have not done this at all levels of our organization. I am not suggesting that every organizational unit needs a detailed and elaborate plan. However, I am convinced that all units would benefit from identifying goals, defining performance indicators, and assigning qualified and motivated individuals to be responsible for leading these efforts.

The benefits of developing a shared vision and shared goals are particularly great at the flotilla level. The differences in performance between successful and less successful flotillas are often startling. But this won't happen unless our leaders at the division and district level are fully supportive and mentor our flotilla leadership. Active and meaningful mentorship is a cultural process.

Each of you has the key to making this happen when you elect your leadership. Look for people who mentor others. These people will take their mentoring skills with them when they reach division, district and National levels.

More Effective Meetings:

At all levels of the Auxiliary we need to increase the interest and utility of unit meetings. Meetings should start and finish on time. Meetings should be interesting – a place where people can learn and have fun. And reports at meetings should focus on important topics and present information not readily available elsewhere.

All too often, meetings – particularly at division level or above – focus on non-substantive topics. Division operations staff officers, for example, read a summary of the number of patrols conducted by each flotilla as reported by their component FSOs-OP – even though this information is available through the written reports that should be read in preparation for the meeting. Reports should focus on items of interest, new initiatives and pilot programs, training opportunities, and cover performance in aggregate terms. We often seem more concerned about allocating presentation time in a democratic way rather than allocating time according to need and interest.

Result: members become uninterested in going to these meetings, which increases the difficulty of effective communications. I prefaced this with “at all levels” and it is my intention to increase the quality and customer focus of our national meetings beginning with NACON and N-Train.

Communications:

Communications remains a challenge for any organization that is widely scattered geographically without frequent meetings (with high attendance).

The reality is that we are relying more and more on electronic communication and for many good reasons. We have worked to increase the quantity, interest, and timeliness of information available on the National web site. I intend to press this issue with all the National staff and to solicit your feedback, through the chain of communication, on ways that we can improve.

One of the challenges we face is how to communicate effectively with members who lack access to E-mail and the Internet. The costs of producing hard copies of everything for everyone are prohibitive. It is important that we address communications at all levels.

Cultural challenges/issues are substantial and the above list covers only those that I think are high-priority. I will work with the NADCOs and department chiefs to address the National issues. Among other things, we should continue to deliberately search for best practices and to share these as part of our concerted effort at continuous improvement.

Transformation:

The second broad area that is important to review is the process of transformation. This topic and specific initiatives are defined and discussed at length in the Auxiliary business plan. I want to cover some key topics:

People:

As part of the discussion of cultural issues, I mentioned that administrative functions need to develop a greater customer focus. The key part of this focus should be on our membership.

To attract and retain quality members requires that our members feel valued. They must have access to relevant and professional training. They need to know what is expected of them. And our member's should only have to put up with a bare minimum of paperwork.

We are working on many of these. Our Training Department has been radically reorganized and simplified. We are shifting the focus of its activities to training new-members and leaving content specialists in various other departments to handle "in service" or more advanced training. Our training materials are good now and are improving. Efficient and effective delivery of our training remains a challenge but we are working hard on that.

We are also working on a commitment/accountability system to marry Coast Guard needs and Auxiliary unit targets; this addresses the important topic of defining expectations.

I also believe that we need to develop improved means for ensuring that qualified members are appointed and elected to leadership positions. Competent, motivated, and dedicated leaders are essential if we are to move forward. Training is one component of leadership development, but we also need to be sensitive at all levels to the need to select our most qualified members, not just those who are friends, those who paid their dues, or those who would be otherwise unemployed.

The costs of patronage are simply too high to bear.

Technology:

Use of advanced technology is a major element of the Department of Defense transformation program. Greater use of unmanned drones, greater battlefield automation and improved computer-based systems to increase battlefield situational awareness are a few examples of current DOD technological initiatives. At the Coast Guard level, Deepwater is a highly technology-intensive project.

The Auxiliary has developed or exploited technology in less obvious but nonetheless important ways. For example, many of our texts were produced using desktop publishing technology, resulting in higher quality, colorful, and attractively laid out products. We use

CDs/DVDs in educational products. PowerPoint is used extensively in our PE and MT areas.

Perhaps most important to date, the Auxiliary has exploited the Internet. We need to further improve the content of our product, but I am satisfied that we are making progress on enhancing content. I am keenly interested in emerging technology such as the use of Palm PDAs for order issuing authority (implemented), Auxiliary aircraft use of the Automatic Identification System (AIS) in areas with coverage gaps (pilot program), and a small proof of concept program to provide automated continuous position reporting to SARDET's for Auxiliary facilities. We need to identify more ways of using technology to improve our effectiveness and our efficiency.

Partnerships:

We have several successful partnerships with various entities (government and private). In the RBS area, for example, we partner with USPS and certain states on the VSC and RBSVP programs. We look to expand this partnership to increase the number of states and to seek other partners.

Because this program does not generate funds for the Auxiliary and we have only limited financial support from the Coast Guard, we are looking to find additional sponsors to fund the purchase of decals, manuals, and other point-of-purchase displays.

We continue to seek partners in the public education area, including “make or buy” decisions on texts. Partnering with a publisher that has access to a distribution network provides a viable business opportunity. If any of you have ideas on possible partners – particularly those that can help fund some of our initiatives – please contact the National department chief who manages the program.

Process:

Developing improved; user friendly and efficient processes will be an important priority for several reasons. For the most part, our current administrative processes are cumbersome, based upon a top down approach, and thoroughly out of date.

We are trained not to come forward with a list of problems without proposing specific solutions. The above list is a mixed bag and I apologize if it comes across as a litany of despair. Rather, this should be viewed as an identification of relevant problems.

At the next series of changes of watch, I want us to be able to look back with pride on our joint accomplishments and to know that we were good stewards of this wonderful organization. We have made good progress to date, but we still have a long way to go.

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