In leadership, accountability can’t be delegated, says Commander Scott D Waddle, USN Ret—and sometimes that means acknowledging a tragic mistake.

“The measure of a true leader is someone who can be accountable for the actions of a team,” Waddle says.

Waddle will present a general session at 8 am Friday, Oct 5, at the Managing Today’s OR Suite Conference to be held Oct 3 to 5 in San Diego. His talk, titled “Failure is Not Final,” is sponsored by The J2 Group, Inc, Perioperative Health Systems Consulting.

Waddle graduated at the top of his class at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. Now 47, he was handpicked in 1998 to command the improved nuclear submarine USS Greeneville. Waddle had 20 years of experience in the construction, maintenance, and operation of nuclear submarines.

On Feb 9, 2001, during a visit of a group of civilians on the USS Greeneville, Waddle gave the order to perform an emergency maneuver to bring the submarine to the surface. The sub ripped into a Japanese fishing vessel, killing 9 people on board.

The collision made global headlines. Waddle has said he was so distraught that he thought briefly about ending his life but decided that would be selfish. Facing possible court-martial and prison time, he decided, against the advice of his attorney and the Navy’s own direction, to take responsibility for the accident at the Navy Court of Inquiry. Waddle acknowledged that mistakes had been made and corners had been cut aboard the 6,900-ton sub as it moved to the surface. The Court of Inquiry decided his actions were not criminal. Although relieved of command, he was allowed to retire from the Navy at the rank of commander.

Although he says the accident remains “the first thing I think about in the morning and last thing I think about when I go to bed at night,” Waddle has rebuilt his life. He has written a book, The Right Thing, which takes readers on board the submarine, through the military court of inquiry, and the aftermath. He writes movingly of being tempted to blame others for the accident, rather than take the stand without immunity.

“To admit my wrong decision is to acknowledge failure on a colossal level,” he writes. “...But in my heart and mind, I knew I had no choice. I had to tell the truth.

“Some people have the ability to compartmentalize events in their lives,” he adds. “For me, that was not a choice.” He says making that decision has sustained him in the challenges he, his wife, and daughter have faced since. Deciding to admit his mistakes was the best decision he could have made, he says now.

“The first hurdle of any organization is to overcome the reluctance toward disclosure, the fear and belief that a bad situation will be worsened if any weakness is disclosed,” Waddle says. “But my message is that you can survive a sentinel event by being accountable, and that it is important to acknowledge what went wrong and study procedures to make sure it doesn’t happen again. If the whole organization is trying to prevent disclosure, then that important scrutiny doesn’t happen.”
Respect the process

One lesson Waddle learned—to respect and not rush the process—can be carried into any OR, he adds. Analogies would be the counting process or the time-out before surgery.

“Safety processes that are in place and proven are there for a reason,” Waddle says.

His final lesson is that the guilt and confusion of making a tragic mistake can be overcome if people assume accountability for their errors.

“Human beings are resilient,” Waddle says. “You can continue to be a contributing and productive member of society if you can stand up and acknowledge your mistakes.”

Download the conference brochure and register online at www.ormanager.com.