

THE NAVY'S MORAL COMPASS: COMMANDING OFFICERS AND PERSONAL MISCONDUCT

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**THE NAVY'S MORAL COMPASS:
COMMANDING OFFICERS AND PERSONAL MISCONDUCT**

by

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United States Navy

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This paper examines the excessive and increasing number of US Navy commanding officers fired for personal conduct recently, analyzing data covering the last 11 years. It proposes that this is a systemic problem, symptomatic of Navy cultural issues and a confusing ethical context in society, combined with a failure to effectively set and uphold an ethical standard within the service. It proposes that the Navy needs to make adjustments in policy, training and personnel processes in order to stem the tide of personal misconduct by commanding officers. Specific recommendations include elevating the priority of this issue and emphasizing the need for change, setting ethical standards through policy and refinement of Navy core values, and modifying the Officer Fitness Report format to specifically address moral character. Finally, if successful, this paper will open the door for debate and reexamination of the Navy's policies, standards for command and ethical foundations.

THE NAVY'S MORAL COMPASS: COMMANDING OFFICERS AND PERSONAL MISCONDUCT

The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible...

—Dwight David Eisenhower¹

The US Navy has a leadership problem. Consider these headlines in 2010: “Cruiser CO Relieved for ‘Cruelty’.”² “CO Fired, Charged with Solicitation.”³ “CO of Attack Sub Fired for Drunkenness.”⁴ These are just a few cases in a recent deluge of early reliefs of “skippers”, the affectionate term for Navy commanding officers. In 2010, 23 Navy COs were relieved of command and “detached for cause,” an enormous increase over previous years. Of greater concern is the fact that of those fired last year, 13 were dismissed for personal misconduct such as sexual harassment, drunkenness and fraternization. While over 97 percent of the Navy’s commanding officers are conducting themselves honorably, the significant and rising number of those that are not raises concerns that must be addressed.

Alarms should be sounding at the highest levels of Navy leadership. Why are so many Navy leaders being fired for ethical, moral and personal behavioral issues? Unfortunately, it appears that no such alarm is sounding. A review of literature revealed only a trickle of discussion on the subject of personal misconduct on the part of military commanders. Contrary to sounding alarms, a Navy spokesman recently stated to the press that there was “no indication that the reliefs are the result of any systemic problem... [The] numbers can just go down or up year to year in small increments.”⁵

The premise of this paper is that we *are* seeing a systemic problem, and even though the number of offenders is low, there are too many. The excessive (and

increasing) number of COs fired is symptomatic of cultural issues within the Navy and a confusing ethical context in society, combined with a failure to effectively set and uphold an ethical standard within the service. It will propose that the Navy needs to make adjustments in policy, training and personnel processes in order to stem the tide of personal misconduct by commanding officers, and will offer some strategies for remedying the situation. Finally, if successful, this paper will open the door for debate and reexamination of the Navy's policies, standards for command and ethical foundations.

Before proceeding, as a matter of expectation management, several caveats are worth mentioning. First, his engineering degree notwithstanding, the author is a Navy pilot, not a mathematician or statistician. Therefore the numerical breakdown herein must not be considered a rigorous statistical analysis by any means. Second, the author conducted several interviews with active and retired Navy flag officers up to and including four-star Admirals, but due to the sensitivity of the subject they will be referenced without attribution. Finally, there are issues concerning the completeness of the data evaluated in this project, which are addressed in the following section.

The Data – Background

This study analyzes summary data provided to the author by the Career Progression Division of the Naval Personnel Command. The data consisted of administrative information and causes for relief of all commanding officers who were relieved while in command, *and for whom Detachment for Cause (DFC) procedures were initiated and approved*. Officers in command positions with ranks of Lieutenant Commander (O-4) and below were excluded from the analysis, because this paper is intended to address personal failures in more senior leaders, those with sufficient time

in service to have a clear understanding of the standards of command, and in which cases the Navy had ample time to identify and exclude them from selection to command.

DFC is the removal of a US Navy officer from their current duty assignment prior to their normal transfer date, and is an administrative procedure which activates the personnel processes to release funding to move officers into and out of the billet in question prior to the original schedule.⁶ This study relies on DFC data because comprehensive records do not exist of COs fired for whom DFCs are not processed. The fact that DFC data is used raises several issues. First, there are many cases in which COs were fired but no DFC process was initiated. Due to the administrative burden and time that the DFC process requires, senior leaders may choose not to initiate the DFC process unless the situation surrounding the firing requires funding for personnel movement. In other words, the actual number of COs relieved early is greater than the number of DFCs.

More significantly, the summary DFC data provided to the author included only the categorical cause for the dismissal in accordance with the Navy's Military Personnel Manual: (1) misconduct; (2) a significant event; (3) unsatisfactory performance over time; or (4) loss of confidence in the officer's ability to command.⁷ In the 101 DFCs evaluated, every submission cited either "loss of confidence" or "significant event", with not one case citing misconduct or performance over time. In some cases the data included an explanation amplifying the categorical basis for the DFC, but did not in many. Public news releases were searched in each undetermined case, and for some recent cases provided additional information,⁸ but there remains a hole in the data. The

bottom line is that the author was unable to determine the cause for approximately 20 percent of the DFCs. Fortunately (or not) the trends are clear enough that valid conclusions may be drawn despite the dearth of information.

While scarce literature has been published, this is not the first study on this subject. In 2004, the Naval Inspector General (IG) conducted an in-depth review of fired COs between 1999 and 2004, and the author was provided the resulting report. The IG team was able to access and analyze information from *all* COs that were fired in that time period, including those for which DFCs were processed and those for which they were not, which provided a more statistically complete picture of the situation at that time.⁹ That study will be referenced when required to provide amplifying information and basis for comparison.

The Numbers

In 2010, 23 commanding officers were processed for DFC, or nearly 2.5 percent of all O-5 and O-6 Navy command billets, more than double any prior year. Figure 1 presents the number of CO DFCs for all causes by year from 1999 through 2010. Figure 2 breaks out the total number of DFCs between those with professional causes (e.g., ship grounding or failed inspection) and those with personal causes (e.g., fraternization or alcohol incident). Ethical violations such as cruelty and abusive leadership were grouped with the personal causes, whereas more generalized leadership failures such as poor command climate or ineffective leadership were classified as professional. Those cases for which cause could not be determined are not included in figure 2 and will be largely ignored for the remainder of this paper. The superimposed linear regression trend lines emphasize that while there is a slight rising

trend in the rate of CO DFCs for professional reasons, there is a clear increasing trend in the number relieved for personal and ethical causes.

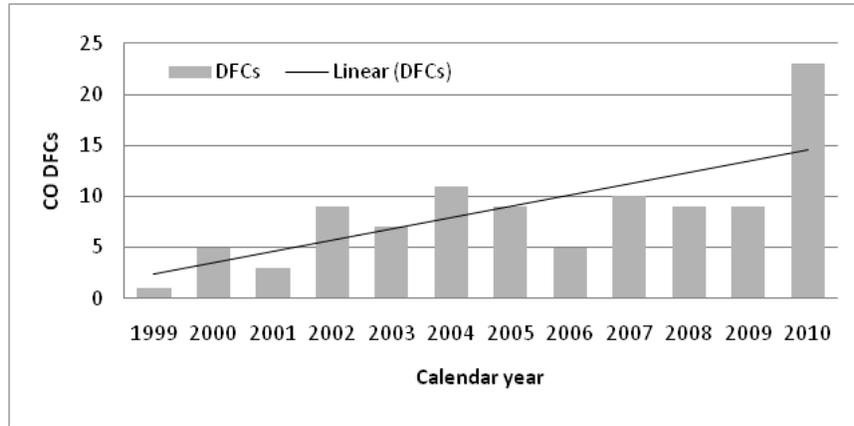


Figure 1
Commanding Officer Detachments for Cause (DFCs)

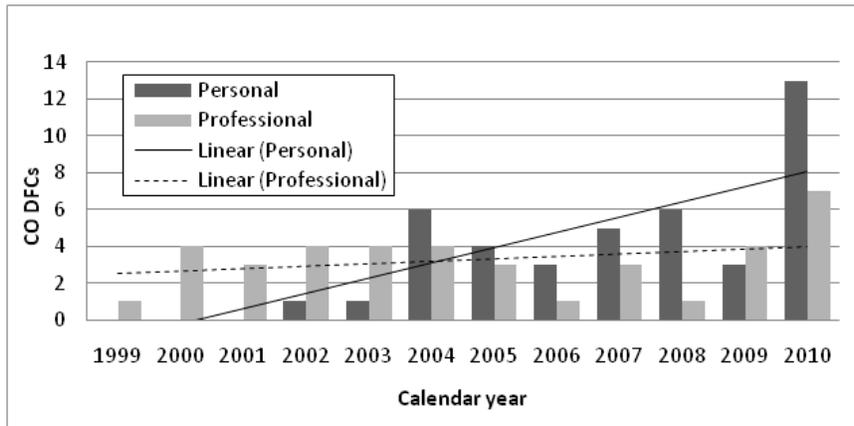


Figure 2
CO DFCs by Cause: Personal and Professional

Figure 3 presents annual personal CO DFCs by community within the Navy: surface; aviation; submarine; and other (including special warfare, medical and supply corps, human resources, etc.) The author categorized each case with the community of the officer, as opposed to that of the command from which he or she was fired. For

instance, an aviator serving as CO of a ship when relieved was grouped with the aviation community.

For comparison, officers from the aviation and surface communities each hold about 25 percent of the total number of O-5 and O-6 commands in the Navy, while submariners hold about half as many. The remaining 37 percent are held by officers of other communities. The data seems to indicate that the surface and submarine communities are largely responsible for the large spike in 2010, with surface DFCs for personal misconduct nearly an order of magnitude above any year previous. Although the aviation community does not show an increasing trend, it is responsible for the largest total number of DFCs and percentage of COs fired.

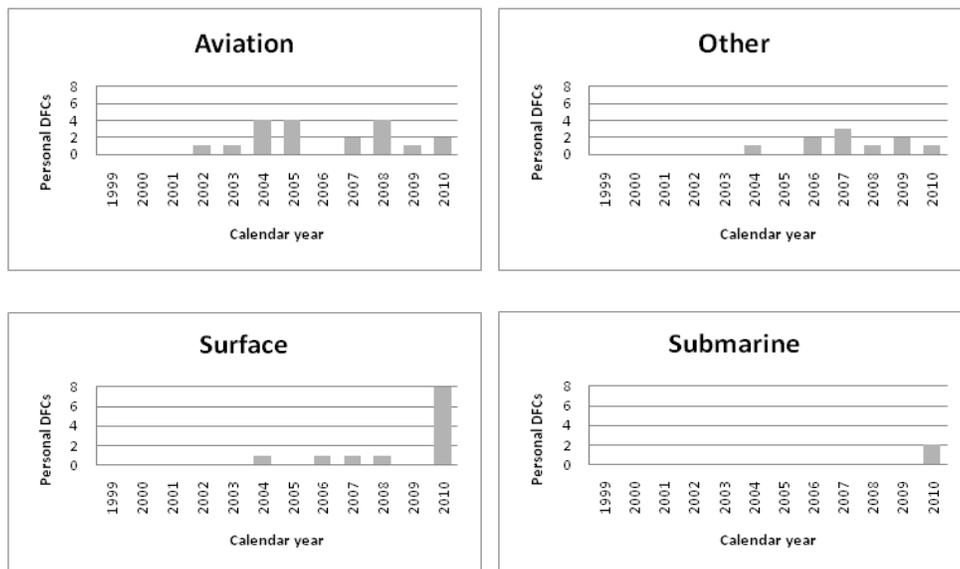


Figure 3
CO DFCs: Personal / Ethical Causes, by Community

Figure 4 presents CO DFCs for personal misconduct broken out by rank. The overall shape of the curve seems to be consistent between ranks, and the linear regression trend lines are almost identical. For reference, about 45 percent of Navy CO

billets are O-6 commands. Notably, the number of DFCs is as great for Captains, who are generally in their second or third command billet, as for Commanders, even though there are fewer billets in the higher rank.

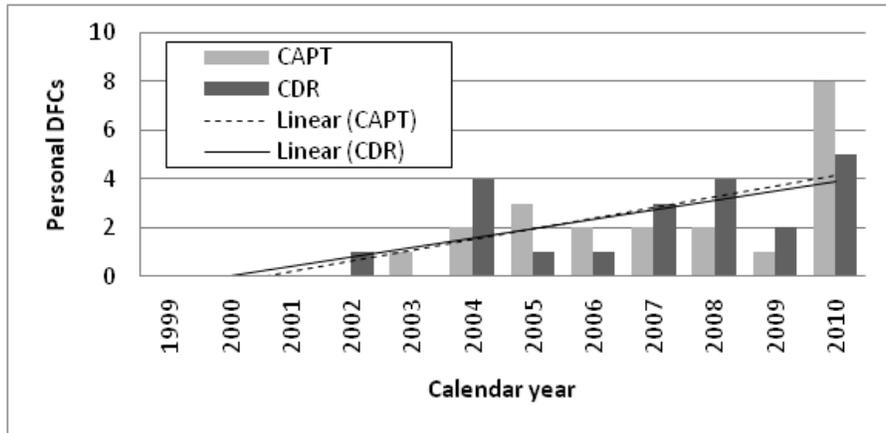


Figure 4

CO DFCs: Personal / Ethical Causes, By Rank

Figure 5 compares CO DFCs between shore duty and sea duty billets. For the sake of comparison, about 62 percent of Navy CO billets are shore duty. Both have similar trend lines and raw numbers, but fewer sea duty billets means that a higher percentage of sea duty COs are fired for personal misconduct than those on shore duty.

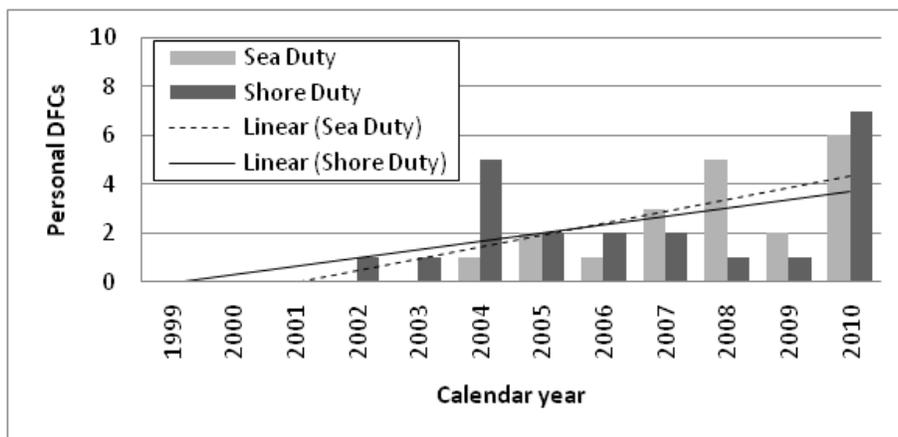


Figure 5

CO DFCs: Personal / Ethical Causes, by Duty Type

Before proceeding with the discussion, it is worth further examining the difference between the number of DFCs and the number of COs fired. The 2004 Naval IG study listed 78 instances of COs being fired between 1999 and 2004, including 26 cases in 2003.¹⁰ In comparison, the DFC data cited in this paper includes only 37 over the same period, with only seven cases in 2003. The Navy Times reported that, on average, 12 COs were fired per year for the past decade,¹¹ while the data presented here averages just over eight per year. These discrepancies are partially explained by the difference in scope of the studies. The Naval IG study (and likely the Navy Times) included O-3 and O-4 commanding officers and officers in charge (OICs), which were specifically excluded from this analysis. Beyond that, the delta between the studies is attributed to the difference between the number of fired COs and the number processed for DFC.

But despite the numerical differences, the DFCs in this paper offer trends that are consistent with the data from the IG study and Navy Times article. While the IG study's 2003 peak seems to be in contrast with this study, there is an observable rise in DFCs from 2002 through 2005 that seems to correspond in with the IG study and Navy Times article. Furthermore, while citing an annual average of 12 COs fired for the last decade (counting the 26 in 2003), Navy Times notes that 16 were relieved early in 2009 and another 17 in 2010, indicating a rising trend in line with this paper. And perhaps most significantly, the Navy Times article states that 11 of the 17 COs fired in 2010 (65 percent) were due to personal misconduct, which is in complete alignment with this paper regarding the number of skippers being relieved for personal and ethical causes.

Academic Analysis and Discussion

It is important to understand that the offending COs knew their actions were out of line. The IG report stated that in "nearly every case, the officers relieved for personal

behavior clearly knew the rules,”¹² and this author’s experiences and interviews revealed the same answer. Likewise, interviews indicate that they did not feel that the rules didn’t apply to them. Either they believed they would not be caught, or that Navy leadership would not hold them accountable, that their misconduct was worth risking their career, or they chose to simply ignore the consequences entirely. All of these logic trains are flawed, and that lack of judgment is concerning in itself. But underlying each decision path to misconduct is a fundamental failure of the individual’s moral compass. They chose to conduct actions that were not consistent with the ethical values we expect from our COs, including integrity, honor and character.

We should explore the concepts of ethics and character further. The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University defines ethics as “standards of behavior that tell us how human beings ought to act in the many situations in which they find themselves.” They explicitly note that ethics is *not*, religion, nor is it following the law or adhering to cultural norms. It is about doing the right thing. The Markkula Center acknowledges that deciding on what to base ethical standards is difficult,¹³ and sometimes it seems we as a society have decided to forego a standard of right and wrong in order not to alienate anyone. In an interview, a high-ranking officer in the Navy’s chaplain community noted that while Navy professional standards have always been high, the social ethical context and personal standards today are confusing. Media glamorizes sexual inhibition and self-satisfaction while the Navy is attempting to promote better behavior. News agencies jump on any hint of misconduct in leadership but just as fervently scream foul when an institution’s standards seem too conservative or too closely echo any religious tenets. Since it is hard to decide upon what to base a

system of ethics, it seems we as a society have decided not to implement one at all. But in the midst of this vacuum, the Markkula Center offers a framework for making ethical decisions. As a bottom line, they offer a simple question to test whether a given decision is ethical: “If I told someone I respect – or told a television audience – which option I have chosen, what would they say?”¹⁴

Closely related to ethics is character. The Josephson Institute calls the following core ethical values “the six pillars of character”: Trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.¹⁵ The will to ask questions such as that noted in above, to embody the pillars of character even (especially?) when nobody is watching, and to allow one’s conduct to be driven by such ethical analysis is the basis of an individual’s moral compass, in this author’s opinion.

At the same time as society’s ethical context has become less clear, the personal and professional standards by which COs are judged have become stricter. This fact was highlighted by a recent essay in the US Naval Institute’s Proceedings. Kevin Eyer, retired Navy Captain and former Surface Warfare Officer, cites a litany of cases in the 1980s in which abusive power and alcohol-related arrests were ignored, as long as the officer was effective in accomplishing the mission.¹⁶ Those familiar with the Navy over the past 20 years are unlikely to dispute the fact that actions once overlooked are today grounds for DFC. But is it right that the standards have changed?

The answer is “yes”, for several reasons. First and foremost, the mission of today’s Navy demands it. Captain Eyer notes that in the timeframe from which he drew his examples, we were fighting a Cold War.¹⁷ Our mission as a Navy was to be prepared to defeat the Soviets at sea and maintain freedom of navigation around the

world. Today, the Navy's missions go far beyond those objectives, including engagement, partnership, security and deterrence.¹⁸ Modern technology, instant communications and a 24-hour news day are among the tools the Navy uses to leverage our global presence mission in support of those missions. However, the same technology vastly increases the potential operational and strategic impact of lapses in judgment of our ship captains and squadron commanders.

Our credibility as a Navy and a nation suffers when our leaders behave contrary to our national interests. As stated in the 2011 National Military Strategy, one of the enduring US national interests is "respect for universal values at home and around the world."¹⁹ Regarding values, the most recent Barrett National Values Assessment for the United States identified honesty, compassion, respect and responsibility / accountability among the top values held by Americans.²⁰ Drunk driving, adultery, fraud and cruelty are not in line with these interests or values, and such behaviors jeopardize our legitimacy as we endeavor to promote our values around the world. Thus misconduct by a CO is considered a mission failure, and that offending officer is rightfully being held accountable.

The second reason supporting the enforcement of tighter standards for Navy COs is military order and discipline. A senior Admiral recently told a group of students at the US Army War College of his concern regarding the recent high rate of misconduct by members of the Chief Petty Officer corps. In order to maintain discipline, COs must set the example. Former Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Vern Clark calls it "covenant leadership": we owe it to our subordinates to commit to developing them and giving them everything they need to succeed, including leadership beyond reproach,

because of their commitment to serve their country.²¹ In a quote attributed to John Paul Jones concerning the Navy commanding officer, “to be well obeyed, he must be perfectly esteemed.”²² COs must set the example, for enlisted sailors and Chief Petty Officers, as well as the officer corps – the future commanding officer pool.

As standards of behavior for COs have been raised, so has the likelihood of violators being caught in misconduct. In years past, allegations of wrongdoing often remained mere allegations, because words alone are generally not sufficient to impugn anyone, let alone the commanding officer of a ship or squadron. However, emails, security cameras, cell phone call/text records and sailors with smart phones have changed the landscape when it comes to getting away with certain behaviors. As Captain (retired) Evers stated, subordinates have a plethora of avenues to document and report perceived offenses of their skippers.²³ As long as COs choose to violate the trust bestowed upon them, the technology of today will cause them to be caught and held accountable.

While standards of conduct have been tightened for COs, there are still traditional cultural issues in the Navy which may counter our efforts to improve behavior. Some psychologists contend that people’s actions are often a product of their environment, and focus on what extent an individual’s behavior can be linked to outside situations.²⁴ In one study, Philip Zimbardo demonstrated how the behavior of a large group of students from Stanford University (each randomly assigned as prisoners or guards for an extended role-playing experiment) changed in accordance with their role. The experiment was stopped early because of the sadistic cruelty of the “guards” and the abject dehumanization of the “prisoners”. Zimbardo believes the environment

caused otherwise good people to become evil, and claims the model explains the abuses of Abu Ghraib prisoners at the hands of US soldiers.²⁵ On top of this theory, the “Bathsheba Syndrome” (named for the object of biblical King David’s affection, whose husband David sent to the front lines to be killed so the King could have her as his own) is receiving attention in academic and Navy circles, for its lesson that everyone may be susceptible to the temptations that come with power and authority.²⁶ It is worth examining whether there may be a link between the culture and environment of the Navy and undesirable behaviors.

Historically, the captain of a Navy ship had to be strong and independent, in order to maintain order among the crew in hostile environments and execute missions while far from home with only tedious communications with superiors. Navy regulations state that “The responsibility of the commanding officer for his or her command is absolute” and that “The authority of the commanding officer is commensurate with his or her responsibility.”²⁷ As Lord Acton said “All power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”²⁸ This toxic authority could conceivably breed cruelty in aspiring commanding officers. And the data does indicate a slight tendency toward abusive leadership, with three DFCs between 1999 and 2010 due to cruelty or abusive leadership of the commanding officer.

Looking further into the culture of the Navy, our history is steeped in tales of behavior which does not fit the model to which we aspire today: drunks, bar fights, gender biases and womanizing (a girl in every port, but none on the ship), and the list goes on. Sailors were *expected* to “let off steam” when the ship came into port, and they did. And if this paper were being written in the 1980s, there would be a fair

argument that our culture promotes the behavior for which skippers today are being fired. But standards of acceptable behavior Navy-wide changed, along with the previously mentioned rise in standards for COs. Alcohol was deglamorized and alcohol-related incidents took on a new dimension that was career-ending for officers. Hazing ceased to be acceptable; ceremonies that previously included humiliation and degradation and personal discomfort (Chief Petty Officer initiation, “Crossing the Line” ceremonies) transformed into events which built esprit de corps without hurting bodies, emotions or spirits. Aviation stunts and joy-riding (“flat-hatting”) were no longer acceptable. With all these changes, commanding officers were held accountable for violations of the standards in their commands. But the new behavioral standards compete with old cultural norms, increasing personal behavioral accountability without addressing the character deficiencies which cause the unacceptable behavior.

Another cultural aspect in the Navy is intolerance for mistakes. A recent article noted that the celebrated Chester Nimitz ran a ship aground as a junior officer, and postulated that the future Fleet Admiral would not have gone far in today’s Navy due risk aversion and intolerance for errors.²⁹ The author of the Nimitz article obviously thought Navy leadership has gone too far recently in punishing errors, both professional and personal. Intolerance for professional mistakes is beyond the scope of this project, and we have already noted that personal misconduct on the part of Navy leadership must not be accepted. But the zero-defect mentality may result in behavioral issues being hidden and covered up, reducing the opportunity for correction, mentoring, development and instruction in ethical standards.

In addition to the culture of the service as a whole, each community within the Navy has its own convictions and subcultures. Aviators are traditionally looked at as cowboys, rule-breakers, “Top Gun” Officer Club partiers and flirts. The aviation community has the highest number of CO DFCs for personal misconduct, with an annual average 50 percent higher than surface warriors. While the averages fit the stereotype and culture, questions arise when the trends are observed. The aviation DFC rate has a virtually horizontal trend line, while the surface and submarine community show recent spikes. One explanation is that the 1991 Tailhook debacle hit the aviation community much harder and closer to home than it did the others, meaning that the “airdales” hit their peak years ago, before the period encompassed by our data. The ultimate cause of the lack of a significant upward trend in the aviation is not obvious in the data and further study will be required for better understanding. However, it is reasonable to conclude that the Naval Aviation culture, as glamorized in movies and naval history, may continue to be attractive to people with adverse behavioral tendencies and may be conducive to unacceptable actions.

On the other hand, surface officers are considered stoic and businesslike. They are always expected to be working – standing watch, conducting inspections, studying for the next qualification – and stress and sleep deprivation is part of the lifestyle. They are seen (at least by members of other communities) as high-strung and competitive (“eat their young” is often used to describe the surface subculture). Other cultural traits in the surface community include public degradation and bullying.³⁰ These characteristics could contribute to abusive leadership, and such a stressful work environment might lead to alcohol abuse incidents. Of the 12 surface CO DFCs for

personal and ethical causes, one was due to abusive leadership, but none cited alcohol-related incidents as a cause. Yet in 2010 the surface community exhibited the greatest increase in DFCs of any community in the Navy. The increase in numbers was largely under the category of sexual misconduct, which will be addressed shortly.

The last community subculture we will examine is the submarine community. Quiet, intelligent and secretive, the officers mirror the platform they operate. Although there is not much data regarding submarine DFCs, it is notable that the causes of nearly one half of the CO DFCs in the undersea community could not be determined.

Ideally, this analysis would provide a deeper analysis of the Navy's subcultures, comparing rates between officer accession sources and gender and other demographic data, to better analyze trends. However, that data was not made available. Additionally, it would be beneficial to extend this glimpse into the cultures and personal conduct of leaders of other services and even business CEOs, in order to further examine the relationship between culture and the corresponding level of misconduct by leadership. The author was not able to obtain such information from the Navy's sister services in the allowed timeframe, but this aspect deserves further study.

Culture notwithstanding, the most prevalent cause of CO DFCs in every community has been sexual misconduct, including inappropriate relationships, fraternization and sexual harassment. Some have written that this is a product of our environment, and that such failures are expected in the sea-going community since men and women are confined in close quarters on a ship for months at a time.³¹ It is certain that mixed gender crews present significant leadership challenges to the commanding officer. Consider the CO fired after nine Chief Petty Officers aboard his ship were found

to be having sexual relationships with junior sailors under their charge, when that CO did not even know about the relationships.³² But while he was fired for ineffective leadership, he maintained the higher personal moral ground and did not fall to the temptation of an inappropriate relationship, which is why he is not numbered with the personal DFCs. This author readily concedes the leadership challenges presented by mixed-gender crews, the likelihood that some junior males and females will interact sexually, and the lure for COs to fall when serving closely with females. But COs can and must conduct themselves beyond reproach and restrain themselves. Unfortunately, as the data shows, too many fall short.

Of the 42 personal CO DFCs in this study, 20 (48 percent) involved sexual misconduct. Fewer than half involved COs of shipboard commands. One of those involved a relationship between a submarine CO and an officer in the Army, clearly not a product of integrated crews. The propensity for sexual misconduct is obviously widespread, but not because men and women deploy together. The problem is clearly *not* mixed gender crews, rather it is a lack of integrity on the part of the offending officers. Whether on a ship with a mixed crew or stationed ashore, commanding officers must keep their relationships in line with the Uniform Code of Military Justice³³ and Manual for Courts Martial³⁴ provisions prohibiting adultery and fraternization.

The Navy is holding COs to a higher behavioral standard, as well we should. But beyond merely holding COs accountable for misconduct, leadership needs to take positive action to develop each officer's moral compass and establish an ethical standard in order to improve the quality of our commanding officer corps and our service. Following is a proposed strategy.

Step one: Establish a Sense of Urgency. According to John Kotter, establishing a sense of urgency is the first step in achieving transformational change in a large complex organization.³⁵ Accomplishing this step requires acknowledgement of the problem, identification of the impacts, and full understanding of those impacts. The Navy has made an effort to be transparent and open, but it has fallen short of fully acknowledging the problem. Anecdotal stories from colleagues in other services indicate that personal misconduct by COs exists in all branches of the military, but the headlines seem to be predominantly Navy. Navy leaders have committed to holding COs *publicly* accountable for their actions, vastly preferable to hiding the action until a disgruntled co-worker posts the information on WikiLeaks. Unfortunately, there has been no obvious effort on the part of senior leadership to elevate the issue to a level that will produce meaningful change. This paper is an effort to try to spark that first step.

Step Two: Set the Standard. Where is the Navy's policy written regarding ethical standards and character? The Deputy Secretary of Defense recently released a memo reinforcing the need for all DOD personnel to act ethically. "Fundamental values like integrity, impartiality, fairness, and respect must drive our actions, and these values must be reinforced by holding ourselves and each other accountable..."³⁶ In the same vein, the Army published a pamphlet entitled "Army: Profession of Arms 2011," which explicitly stresses the need for adherence to an unfailing Army ethical standard. It cites the need for moral high ground in discretionary judgments of all officers, especially leaders, and it quotes Title 10 of the United States Code, which states "All commanding officers and others in authority in the Army are required ... to show themselves a good

example of virtue, honor, patriotism and subordination.”³⁷ Furthermore, the Army Operating Concept of 2010 includes three pages of moral, ethical and behavioral discussion and emphasizes the Army’s core values: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage.³⁸

The author was unable to find similar proclamation of ethical standards in Navy policy literature, and there is no similar moral discussion in the Naval Operating Concept of 2010. And the Navy’s core values (honor, courage and commitment) – while concise and easy to remember – provide only implicit reference to ethical standards. In order for the Navy to improve conduct from the top down, we must focus on the fundamental ethical standards which underlie the behaviors we want to promote. Unless we stress ethical standards, our efforts to change behavior will always fall short.

A retired four-star Admiral noted the reluctance of leaders to specifically implement ethical standards, saying that there was concern that such efforts would be construed as religious. The same camp argues that character and ethics are “implicit” in the stated core values of the Navy. One Admiral observed “you can’t have honor without integrity”. But ethics are not religious, as noted earlier. And if there is only implicit reference to character, we can only expect implicit compliance. Granted, a treatise on ethics in the Naval Operating Concept is unlikely to change one officer’s behavior. But as one element of a Navy-wide campaign to emphasize character and ethical standards for the officer corps, it might help in creating a shift in the mindset and the culture as a whole.

Step Three: Improve the Metrics. In the Navy, the Officer Fitness Report (FITREP) is the basic periodic evaluation of all officers. The effectiveness of the

promotion and screening process is determined by whether (based on FITREPs) it correctly identifies officers worthy of selection – and perhaps more importantly – of non-selection. Our system needs improvement. This author thinks many COs fired for personal misconduct should have never been selected for command. Nine of the DFCs cited in this study were due to alcohol-related incidents. It is likely that previous supervisors of these officers were aware of their propensity to drink. At least 16 DFCs were for inappropriate relationships, and while some of them may have been difficult to foresee, this author believes many were not. Behaviors such as cruelty, abuse of position for personal gain, solicitation of prostitution and indecent exposure typically do not suddenly or without warning appear in an otherwise upstanding officer. Somebody knew, or should have known, but did not document the behavior adequately to prevent selection for command – but why not?

Part of the problem is the previously noted dearth of published policy espousing character and ethical behavior in this era of ethical confusion, compounded by a complete lack of focus on ethical training for Naval officers. This author graduated from Officer Candidate School in 1989 and has served 22 years, and to date the only Navy training on ethics I've received was on fraud and financial abuse. This lack of focus has led to a failure of leadership to some degree in the Navy. Many COs have shown an attitude of misguided understanding to junior officers who demonstrate character flaws such as alcohol abuse or infidelity. "I did that when I was younger, so why should I punish them for doing the same thing I did?" seems to be the theme.

Ultimately, COs are charged with grooming future COs. When character flaws become evident in subordinates because of their actions, COs must actively engage the

offender. One of two responses is likely. If the officer admits fault, accepts responsibility and humbly receives counseling, the teaching moment will be achieved. If however the officer disputes the details, argues and deflects blame, there may be an intrinsic ethical void that must be documented. Rather than being friends or drinking buddies of the officers under their charge, COs must explicitly demand integrity – and mentor and/or document shortcomings appropriately. Otherwise we encourage the behavior we want to eliminate in those chosen for command, which ensures the cycle will continue.

Before those former supervisors are thrown under the bus for failing to document moral shortcomings, note that the FITREP does not lend itself to facilitating such openness. The FITREP system needs to be modified to explicitly measure what we want to see in future commanding officers. Some have recommended incorporating elements of a 360-degree evaluation into the FITREP process, which provides feedback from the officer's peers and subordinates in addition to supervisors.³⁹ Some colleagues of the author believe the FITREP system is completely broken and should be rebuilt from scratch. Mending all of the FITREP's faults is beyond the scope of this paper, but some discussion on the evaluation process is worthwhile.

Part of the FITREP's problem goes back to the zero-defect culture discussed earlier. Even a slightly less-than-glowing FITREP narrative can be career-ending. It is extremely difficult for selection boards to determine who is best, and it is very difficult for reporting seniors to make the best stand out without killing the runners-up. The 360-degree evaluation is not the answer, because its value is in the self-awareness provided to the officer of how their view of themselves compares to the views of seniors, peers

and subordinates. And for the purpose of this paper, there is no indication that a 360-degree evaluation would more effectively identify officers predisposed toward personal conduct contrary to command. None of the flag officers interviewed for this study supported wholesale changes to the FITREP system, and all believed that the reporting senior is the correct person to evaluate their officers' suitability to promote and select, not peers and subordinates. However, something must be done in order improve the FITREP's utility in screening out adverse behavioral tendencies.

The problem with today's FITREP in identifying behavioral shortcomings lies in its lack of explicit evaluation of ethical standards. Seven quantitative performance traits are graded on every FITREP: Professional expertise, command climate / equal opportunity, military bearing / character, teamwork, mission accomplishment and initiative, leadership, and tactical performance. Military bearing is the trait widely regarded to be a means to document issues concerning physical fitness and body composition, although by regulation it includes appearance, demeanor and conduct, physical standards, and adherence to Navy core values.⁴⁰ Granted, the core values include honor, and honor implies integrity. But should we have to dig three levels to evaluate integrity, and should it be masked in the block regarded as a physical fitness trait? Not if we think it is important. In comparison, the Army's Officer Evaluation Report requires input on all seven Army core values as part of the character evaluation of the officer, including integrity and selfless service. Specific evaluation of character is required to emphasize the priorities we desire in commanding officers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Only a small percentage of COs is being fired for personal misconduct, but that number is too high and it continues to grow. Consider this analogy. In 2003, the Navy's

aviation mishap rate was 1.89 mishaps per 100,000 hours flown, and had hovered around that value for several years after decades of steady improvements. At the time the Secretary of Defense directed that we reduce the mishap rate by 50 percent from that level, because even that small rate included numerous mishaps that could and should have been prevented.⁴¹ In 2010, the rate had improved to 0.94 mishaps per 100,000 flight hours,⁴² due to the priority and emphasis set by leadership. By the same token, our rate of CO DFCs for personal and ethical failures is too high, and we can and must do better – but doing so will require that Navy leadership makes it a priority.

The Navy has taken some steps. As noted, behavioral standards are tighter than ever. A 360-degree evaluation has been included as part of the training track prior to taking a command billet, as recommended by the 2004 IG study.⁴³ Unit command climate evaluation results are visible at higher echelons of leadership. Finally, each session of the pre-command Navy Command Leadership School is addressed by senior flag officers, including one from the Chaplain corps, concerning ethical behavior. Some of these actions were likely in response to the spike of CO firings in 2003, and others prompted by the 2010 spike. But what we need is an enduring shift in focus, to preempt the next peak. While every flag officer interviewed for this paper sees CO misconduct as an issue requiring attention, there does not seem to be consensus that this issue urgently demands transformational change.

Several changes are recommended. First of all, leadership must elevate the priority of ethical behavior and emphasize the need for change, including creation of a central database of every CO relieved of command due to personal or professional failures (including the cause for the dismissal) to facilitate future tracking and analysis.

Secondly, the Navy must undertake an explicit campaign to set standards of integrity and honorable behavior. Personal integrity and selflessness should be at the forefront of our human capital strategy and must be reflected in policy at the highest levels. Consideration should be given to expanding the Navy's core values to include explicit mention of character, or at least redoubling efforts to develop the concept of honor in our service. "Honor, courage, commitment, and integrity" has a nice ring to it (but humility, trustworthiness, character or numerous other similar terms could work in place of integrity). This campaign should include regular, lively and meaningful emphasis on ethical behavior for all Navy personnel.

Finally, the Officer Fitness Report should be modified in format and in concept to explicitly measure what leaders want to see, and should specifically address character and integrity. This change should be accompanied by training for reporting seniors on ethical expectations and (as the 2004 Navy IG report stated) on the need to include every aspect, including personal integrity, when determining who is qualified for command. With these conclusions and recommendations, let the debate begin on the merits of this study, and alternative methods of raising the bar of commanding officer behavior, integrity and moral character.

Endnotes

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