

TOP STORIES:

1. The Moral Component Of Leadership

To strengthen the Navy's ethical foundation and contribute to mission success, Sailors must reflect on their principles.

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... Admiral Jonathan Greenert, U.S. Navy

We live in violent, uncertain, and complex times. The future is unpredictable. The only certainty is change, and its pace is relentless. While we face these conditions both locally and globally, we cannot let ourselves become overwhelmed by the environment around us. Every Sailor is expected to lead in challenging circumstances and we must do so with a certitude rooted in our core values.

Our principles are the lens through which we lead and make decisions. They allow us to be consistent when we deal with any crisis. Challenges and assigned missions are transitory, but our principles and core values are not. The thoughts outlined here are designed to help refresh our moral component of leadership – something worthy of review, thought, and commitment. The intended output is a renewed

focus on ethical decision-making and behavior, so that each of us can become the Sailors and naval leaders that our people aspire to emulate.

Expectations: What Our People Deserve

A higher standard of behavior is a hallmark of naval service, and each Sailor is responsible and accountable to meet it. In its most basic form, the standard can be described as ethical conduct in an environment of dignity and respect. That is a fundamental expectation of all Sailors by all Sailors. It is also what American citizens expect of their armed forces.

The Navy is a melting pot of talent. We are stronger for our diversity and the different perspectives and experiences it brings, but we do not all necessarily share the same cardinal headings on our moral compass when we join the military. A calibration and alignment are sometimes required. It is important, therefore, that each unit and each service member take responsibility for creating an environment that allows strong moral roots to grow and be sustained. Integrity, the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles founded on honor, is the cornerstone of an environment in which moral

development can flourish. This essential element of leadership is vital not only to sustain a climate in which professional Sailors can thrive, but to ensure the Navy can successfully operate as a team – we must believe each other and be willing to believe in each other. Integrity starts and ends with each Sailor. It is uniquely yours and can never be taken away by others, but once lost or relinquished, it is extremely difficult to recover. Integrity gives rise to unconditional trust: trust in the service, trust in equipment, trust in shipmates, trust in the leader, trust in subordinates. Each service member must learn to trust, but must also earn trust. Without trust, we cannot delegate authority. Without delegating authority, we cannot effectively operate the Navy. The service is an interdependent organization, and everyone must be counted and depended on to do their job. The pilot must trust the maintainer and the “shooter,” a ship’s captain must trust the officer of the deck and the helmsman, the SEAL must trust his teammates. Mutual trust and respect within the unit strengthen morale and team effectiveness. The opposite is also true: The erosion of trust and respect in the unit weakens esprit de corps and

undermines mission performance.

The chain of command is responsible for helping to ensure that standards are met by all. Commanding officers exercise leadership “to develop and strengthen the moral and spiritual well-being of personnel under his or her command.” (1) Each CO is beholden to a “charge of command” that captures this obligation and calls on leaders to build trust through professional competence, judgment, good sense, and respect. Strengthening a unit’s collective character is part of the unique authority and responsibility given to COs. Since “to whom much is given, much is expected,” the Navy holds leaders at all levels accountable for moral infractions as well as their unit’s overall mission performance. The Navy’s culture of accountability is on public display each time we relieve a CO for cause. We quickly notify Congress in these rare cases, and we do so to demonstrate our commitment to the highest standards of public service.

Maintaining high standards is not just the CO’s responsibility, however. Every leader within a unit is expected to exercise his or her responsibility with humility, show the way by personal example, and act

as a role model for upstanding behavior and decency. Leaders are charged with fostering a climate where ethical behavior and moral courage are encouraged and rewarded. Sometimes this is simply a matter of ensuring that appropriate decisions are made on the countless number of items in our daily routine – small moments of truth where you do the right thing. Exercising moral courage may involve being the lone voice of caution or dissent when a misguided group or individual – even the commander, CO, or officer-in-charge – places an organization on a bad ethical path. Leadership should be judicious with the use of time, money, and resources entrusted to one's charge. Leaders define and set boundaries, purposely shaping their commands in a positive way, and staying vigilant for any slippage in the standards. Experience tells us that leaders “get what they inspect, not what they expect,” and that people will respond when others believe in them, and when subordinates have something to believe in.

Establishing A Moral Compass

One's education, environment, faith, and experience shape individual value systems. Integrity and trust

serve as the building blocks that help individuals build an even stronger ethical foundation once they enter the service. Trust in the institution, for example, allows them to more fully embrace the Navy's core values of honor, courage, and commitment. Articulating values is easier than living by them. The Navy's core values are there to help guide your actions, because ultimately one's actions alone define one's moral standing. It is not just about knowing the philosophy or understanding the watchwords; it is about saying and doing the proper thing. It is about accepting responsibility, rejecting passivity, and refusing to be inert in the face of a moral challenge. As Theodore Roosevelt said, "Knowing what is right doesn't mean much unless you do what is right." It takes character to act on one's conscience and step in when something does not seem right. This characteristic is more important for a leader than technical knowledge and practical proficiency.

Establishing a moral compass and using it to guide your choices involves understanding the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. It means listening to the small voice in your head, your

intuition, that warns against words or actions that might be disrespectful, inappropriate, or wrong. It means focusing on our duty, and not looking to derive any personal benefit from our activities. It means giving credit where credit is due. It means building one another up, not tearing one another down. It means being a good team player and shouldering your allotted responsibilities. It means being truthful about what is going on, speaking up even when it may not be popular to do so. It means acknowledging when it may be beyond your capacity to accomplish a task and asking for help. It means looking out for one another at all times, on and off duty, and intervening when necessary to protect a shipmate who may be in trouble or headed in the wrong direction. It means being considerate, fair, humble, and open to serving others, even as you set high standards and pursue tough objectives. And it means becoming your best self, treating others as you yourself want to be treated.

Making Tough Choices

Making the right choice is not always easy. Any number of hazards can threaten to put us off course. Some individuals can fall victim to the Bathsheba

Syndrome, an occasional byproduct of success where those heady with power can start to feel entitled to more opportunities or privileges, begin to believe the rules do not apply to them, and then think they are not accountable. Numerous studies and anecdotes have proven that even morally virtuous people can succumb to temptations when this misguided mindset begins to form. Another threat to good ethical decision-making is the inability to commit to the institution. That is, the unwillingness to operate by all the rules, regulations, codes, procedures, and guidelines of one's service, warfare community, unit, or position. Every Sailor is expected to be "all in" on those requirements, which exist for the common good.

Tough ethical choices can be even harder when individuals are afflicted with apathy, complacency, or close-mindedness, all of which can be contagious if not put in check. Another danger is misplaced loyalty, which occurs when a person feels a stronger allegiance to another individual or sub-group rather than to the Constitution and the unit (institution). Misplaced loyalty erodes good order and discipline because it trades institutional trust for protection of

the undeserving. On matters of ethics, the interests of our nation and Navy must always come first. This simple principle is in our oath of office, which we reaffirm at every promotion or reenlistment.

Ironically, pressure to succeed can create the toughest ethical dilemmas. Individuals and units under stress to produce results may begin to cut corners, comply less strictly with procedures, inflate reports, assume undue safety risks, or treat people unfairly. Those who fall victim to these dilemmas try to rationalize that mission accomplishment trumps all else, but the reality is that the ends do not justify the means. Good leaders help prevent “gundecking” by ensuring that subordinates are qualified to do their jobs, have time to do their jobs, and do their jobs correctly. That approach makes our tasks more executable, but perhaps no less strenuous. As President Woodrow Wilson reminded graduating U.S. Naval Academy midshipmen in 1914, “Nothing is worthwhile that is not hard. You do not improve your muscle by doing the easy thing; you improve it by doing the hard thing, and you get your zest by doing a thing that is difficult, not a thing that is easy.” Our toughest challenges can manifest in tests of

either physical or moral courage.

Moral fortitude translates to good actions in peacetime. It also builds resilience that enables service members to cope in times of war and stress. The quiet strength that comes from understanding that your outfit is engaged in a higher cause, that you have a distinct purpose and direction, and that your shipmates are counting on you is what galvanizes warfighters to confront mortal danger. Those who are morally centered, take responsibility for their actions, and have a pragmatic understanding of their place in the enterprise – and are valued for such – are the ones who can do their best regardless of the circumstances they face. We are inspired by men and women who commit themselves fully when the chips are down, do their duty, and demonstrate courage and self-sacrifice when it matters most. Exemplary leaders such as Lieutenant Commander Ernest Evans at the Battle off Samar, Father Vincent Capodanno in the Que Son Valley, and Lieutenant Michael Murphy in the mountains of the Hindu Kush all made a difference because they were totally committed to their causes.

A Conducive Command Climate

To strengthen our moral foundation, each member of the U.S. Navy is expected to know and follow the rules and regulations of the service. Uniformed and civilian personnel are not on this journey alone. We keep ourselves ethically fit through contact with one another. Units that take time to discuss moral and ethical issues are generally more prepared to face the tough times. Dialogue leads to thought and reflection, which in turn allow individuals time to grasp and internalize lessons, so that when tested or under moral duress an instinctive sense of “the right thing to do” prevails. Individuals are more likely to make proper choices in the heat of the moment if a command has created this kind of atmosphere. Units that encourage dignity and respect for one another perform the best. Leaders who set the right example, invest in their subordinates, offer them opportunities to succeed, and build both their technical and ethical skills are the ones who succeed in gaining and retaining loyalty. A characteristic of a healthy, ready organization is that it knows how to learn, balances risks and consequences, and is as tolerant of innocent mistakes as it is intolerant of character failings.

Commands that build a strong moral foundation into their operation are the most resilient, ready to weather the toughest storms. They also tend to be the most bold, confident, and accountable.

Exercising the moral component of leadership is essential for today's leaders. Integrity and trust are vital to our institution and the missions we perform for the nation. Integrity and trust act as the aft and forestays of our core values of honor, courage, and commitment. Think about your own ethical compass – use it, calibrate it – so you stay on course. Our ethics underpin our character; our character defines us and provides the foundation of leadership.

As Vice Admiral James Stockdale reminded us, “Character is probably more important than knowledge ... The sine qua non of a leader has lain not in his chess-like grasp of issues and the options they portend, but in his having the character, the heart, to deal spontaneously, honorably, and candidly with people, perplexities, and principles.”

(2) Think about this as you confront the challenges of today and tomorrow. When we promote dignity and respect and do the right thing regardless of the personal consequences, we generate a positive,

lasting effect on others and contribute to mission success. Strong moral leaders have always been and always will be an indispensable source of power that enables our Navy to serve its nation as a cohesive, proud, and effective fighting force.

Endnotes:

1. U.S. Navy Regulations, 1990, Chapter 8.
2. James Bond Stockdale, "Leadership in Times of Crisis," *To Promote Peace: U.S. Foreign Policy in the mid-1980s*, Dennis L. Bark, ed. (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute, 1984), 43.

Admiral Greenert is the 30th Chief of Naval Operations.

<http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2015-09/moral-component-leadership>