

2014

Strengthening Our Naval Profession through a Culture of Leader Development

James Kelly

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Kelly, James (2014) "Strengthening Our Naval Profession through a Culture of Leader Development," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 67 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol67/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

STRENGTHENING OUR NAVAL PROFESSION THROUGH A CULTURE OF LEADER DEVELOPMENT

Furthering our advantage as the world's finest Navy requires developing leaders who personify their moral obligation to the naval profession by upholding Navy Core Values and Navy Ethos; fulfill their obligations as leaders of character and integrity; and confidently exercise their authority and responsibility with a strong and abiding sense of accountability for their actions throughout a career of selfless service.

NAVY LEADER DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY, JANUARY 2013

Who are the leaders in our Navy? If “four star admirals” is the response, that is the wrong answer.* The right answer is: *every* Sailor, insofar as he or she is responsible for other Sailors, is a leader in our great Navy.† From the most junior enlisted personnel to the most senior officers, all are a part of the leadership equation. Junior enlisted personnel need to be recognized as prospective leaders who have the potential for strategic impact through their performance—not as folks “who just follow orders”—just as senior officers are called on to be bold and decisive leaders with the responsibilities of promoting and safeguarding the morale of those under their command. Indeed, all Sailors must understand that we—individually and collectively as the Navy Team—are accountable for the welfare of our shipmates, no matter our respective ranks.

Leadership is not just about what we do, it is about who we are. Being an effective leader requires more than mastering a checklist of skills. At its core, being effective leaders is about who we are as members of the naval *profession*. First and foremost, the naval profession exists to serve our country, to help accomplish our

* The epigraph is from U.S. Navy Dept., *The Navy Leader Development Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: n.d. [January 2013]), available at www.usnwc.edu/navyleader. I would like to thank Dr. Olenda Johnson and Dr. Carnes Lord, in particular, and my Leadership & Ethics team in the College of Operational and Strategic Leadership in general, for their invaluable contributions to this article.

† In this article, the term “Sailors” represents both the enlisted members of the U.S. Navy and the officer corps, at all ranks and grades, E-1 to O-10.

nation's purposes and objectives, and to protect our way of life. Every Sailor, then, as a member of the naval profession is called to selfless service, to live by a set of core values, and to exhibit the ethos the Navy espouses. As members of the naval profession we possess specialized knowledge, skills, and expertise that enable us continually to achieve mission success. We are warfighters. At the same time, the naval profession has the responsibility of ensuring that our members uphold Navy standards and are developed as effective Navy leaders. *Ship—Shipmate—Self* applies here: The “ship” is the naval profession and the Navy’s global mission set; our shipmates are the members of our team whom we look after and who look after us, always; and “self” is every Sailor—the warfighting member of the naval profession dedicated to a life of selfless service to our nation and Navy.

So, where do we stand today in terms of how we set out to develop our leaders?

Let us state the obvious: the Navy makes good leaders. Just look through the annals of history or the lens of today to witness the extraordinary leadership that Sailors of all ranks have exhibited in times of both peace and war. For the most part, Navy culture dictates that leadership derives from command at sea—which, many will agree, is a unique and challenging experience that demands self-reliance, independence, sound judgment, and confidence. Within the Navy culture, however, there is an expectation that leadership “just happens,” or that effective leadership is achieved through what Admiral James Stavridis, recently retired, has described as “transference”—“just do what I do and you will be a good leader.”* We may couple this with robust just-in-time training that ensures technical and tactical competence, and occasionally we augment our experiences with leadership training that focuses on a prescribed set of skills. In the end, though, we have a Navy culture in which leaders are forged primarily by experience and independent operation at sea.

What this reflects is that as a Navy we have not deliberately attended to developing the person as a leader (with “leader” being about the individual, “leadership” being about skills). What is lacking is an intentional process aimed at growing our Sailors. Instead we tend to leave development of the Sailor to chance or opportunistic events based on career timing or availability. Nor have we emphasized the significance of being members of *the naval profession* as we should. We seem to identify most closely with our individual communities first (“I am an aviator”) and our Navy second. Consequently, the way we tend to think about “leadership” development has excluded (perhaps unintentionally) a purposeful focus on cultivating leaders of character who embody Navy core values—honor, courage, commitment—and the Navy ethos.

* Adm. James Stavridis, then Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, comments during a briefing on the Navy Leader Development Continuum, Naval War College, Newport, R.I., 24 October 2012.

Furthermore, we must acknowledge that as a Navy we tend to undervalue the contribution of education in developing our Sailors as leaders. We limit the time Sailors are given to attend schoolhouses, or we seek to waive the requirement altogether. We mandate the shortest possible course lengths, while structuring career paths designed to maximize operational experiences. This has created a culture where going to the schoolhouse or attending war college is considered “time off”—rather than an uncompromising investment in our people and in our profession. This must change. Consider the following, from Admiral Arleigh Burke, in January 1959:

There is one element in the profession of arms that transcends all others in importance; this is the human element. No matter what the weapons of the future may be, no matter how they are to be employed in war or international diplomacy, man will still be the most important factor in Naval operations. This is why it is so important that under the greater pressure of our continuing need to develop the finest aircraft, the most modern submarines, the most far ranging carriers and the whole complex of nuclear weapons, we must keep uppermost in mind that leadership remains our most important task.

Admiral Burke’s observation is as relevant today as it was more than fifty years ago. And this is why the Navy has embarked on extraordinary culture change in the way we develop our people as leaders—from the time a Sailor voluntarily joins our great Navy to the time he or she departs.

How do we think more broadly about leader development for our Sailors?

Absent from our current leader development efforts is a continuum of learning that is systematic, integrated, and comprehensive. What we generally recognize as “leadership training” is for the most part disjointed and episodic, in some instances simply hit-or-miss. Therefore, the first step in creating a culture for Navy leader development is to establish a career-long “Leader Development Continuum” from E-1 (seaman recruit) to O-10 (admiral, four stars), across all Navy communities, and from accession to retirement or conclusion of service. Development of Navy leaders must, of necessity, be a deliberate and progressive process. Most importantly, this establishment of a career-long Leader Development Continuum is driven by the conviction of Navy senior leadership that such an effort is essential for sustaining and strengthening the naval profession, now and into the future. Critically, this effort is *not* just another “compliance” program designed to remedy a set of problems. Rather, it is the start of a long-term and proactive effort to influence the culture of the Navy and better prepare leaders for the future—a future characterized by increasing complexity and uncertainty, a future that brings its own set of new and unique challenges to the character of each Sailor as a leader.

So, it is within this context that over the last year and a half a dedicated team has been working to reshape the way the Navy approaches leader development, while laying the groundwork for a Leader Development Continuum. The foundation for the continuum is the *Navy Leader Development Strategy*—quoted at the beginning of this article—signed by the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral Jonathan Greenert, in January 2013. Fundamentally, the *Navy Leader Development Strategy* establishes expectations for building leaders who will confidently and competently win our wars and meet the peacetime challenges of the increasingly complex maritime environment, as the scope of Sailors’ responsibilities grows. More specifically, the strategy serves as our Navy’s overarching guidance and framework for how we align, in a deliberate manner, the multiple ways by which we develop our people through experience, education, training, and personal development. The latter element, personal development, entails cultivating self-reflection, critical thinking, moral growth, and lifelong learning—areas of leader development that have garnered little, if any, systematic attention in the Navy writ large.

The *Navy Leader Development Strategy* further describes the “Leader Development Outcomes” (LDOs) that connect education, training, experience, and personal development, enabling their systematic alignment in order to optimize Navy leader development. The LDOs are the character attributes, behaviors, and skills expected of Navy leaders—enlisted and officer—as defined for specific career-transition points. They set the leader expectations for each of us at all ranks, and they will be integrated throughout the Leader Development Continuum. Foundational LDOs are included in the *Navy Leader Development Strategy*; expanded LDOs for enlisted personnel, warrant officers, and commissioned officers were approved by the Vice Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Mark Ferguson, in August 2013.

The CNO is leading this charge. The Leader Development Continuum Council (LDCC)—a body of key stakeholders at the flag and master-chief level, chaired by the President of the Naval War College—is guiding the principal processes necessary for establishing a career-long Leader Development Continuum. The LDCC in turn reports to the Advanced Education Review Board (AERB), chaired by the Vice Chief of Naval Operations. Navy community leaders (type commanders) are charged with tailoring leader development continuums within their communities that integrate the unifying Leader Development Outcomes while also recognizing the specific character and unique needs of each community—a process that is now well under way.

Where do we go from here?

Our first priority in establishing a Leader Development Continuum is to leverage existing programs and structures. Within our Navy there are numerous development opportunities—whether through experience, education, training,

or personal development. These opportunities require aligning, synchronizing, and sequencing to enable systematic and progressive leader development. We are also looking to communities to share best practices; we can learn from each other. Additionally, as gaps in leader development are identified we are pursuing ways to address them. Ultimately, we must be imbued with the mind-set—and operate with the conviction—that developing our people as leaders is central to our warfighting ethos. As the CNO notes in his opening letter in the *Navy Leader Development Strategy*, time associated with rigorous leader development is “complementary” to and “necessary” for the demands of technical and tactical competence. This is the extraordinary culture change we seek.

Realizing this vision for leader development means the Navy must embrace institutional and cultural change. This is a vision that transcends our distinct Navy communities and extends beyond ensuring the mastery of specific technical and tactical skills. Indeed, rethinking the way we approach Navy leader development will filter into everything we do, including career management, evaluation systems, etc. We are preparing the next generation of leaders for three decades into our future. This culture change will take time and effort, but we cannot afford to say that it is too hard or too big, or that there is too much pushback, and not get it done. We have to do what we know is right for our Navy and our Sailors. We have to do the best we can for our people as leaders, or our platforms simply won't matter. Although we know that competence reigns supreme, we also need to focus on developing leaders of character on the basis of our ethos and the unique qualities of naval service to strengthen the naval profession. Character is as much a core competency as technical and tactical prowess.

A final point. At the core of the profession of arms is a sense of service. By improving our leader development practices—and making the positive changes in our personnel and institutional systems that it will certainly engender—we will renew our commitment to the naval profession and the development of our Sailors as leaders who exemplify the highest standards of service. The *Navy Leader Development Strategy* states that “there is no higher priority than to develop effective Navy leaders.” We owe it to our Sailors, our service, and our nation to ensure that our actions and our efforts fully reflect that priority.

REAR ADMIRAL JAMES KELLY, USN (RET.)

Rear Admiral Kelly is dean of the College of Operational and Strategic Leadership at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. A former Naval Flight Officer (at his retirement in 2009 he was the longest-serving Naval Flight Officer on active duty), he commanded Attack Squadron 115, USS Sacramento (AOE 1), USS Constellation (CV 62), Carrier Strike Group 5, and Task Force 70.