



Leading the Way in Sailor Development – Ethical Discussion

Message from the CO



The format of this issue is altered to allow focus on the issues of ethics, character, and leadership. CPPD sponsors a Navy-wide Character Quick Poll, and I believe it is time to “put some analysis on the table” for your consideration as leaders. While the complete survey results are available upon request, I want to focus on a discrete element of the poll. With very little variation over the last several years, note the results of the following survey elements:

My leaders demonstrate ethical behavior and commitment to Navy Core Values (NCVs):
Percent that “Agree/Strongly Agree”: Officer respondents – 80. Enlisted respondents – 60.

Leaders at my command demonstrate honesty and personal integrity in all their dealings:
Percent that “Agree/Strongly Agree”: Officer respondents – 82. Enlisted respondents – 54.

Let’s be frank. We all know about the very visible 1-2% of Navy leaders that have been relieved due to a demonstrated lack of adherence to Core Values, and one may speculate that there is another small percentage that perhaps have not yet been caught, but we must ask ourselves if we believe 20-40% of our leaders are truly NOT adhering to NCV’s. There is no evidence that supports this perception. In fact, when asked about their own understanding and adherence to the same values, the responses are routinely above 95%. So why is there a gap between our values, and how subordinates perceive those same values in leadership? My hypothesis is unabashedly simple – we are not talking about ethical decisions and core values enough. Take a scenario where a junior person raises a safety concern. You risk-assess properly, make a decision and direct appropriate action. Yet often the junior Sailor does not get feedback on the due diligence performed. The perception of the Sailor is that you simply “blew off” the safety concern for mission accomplishment, and this is often viewed as unethical.

Many leaders will argue that “there isn’t time to explain every decision”, that the Sailor should salute smartly and execute. In essence, you are saying they should “trust you.” In some combat or high tempo situations, there is some validity to this. However, the evidence is that without some communication from you on your consideration and logic...they do NOT trust you. We cannot continue to use the excuse of OPTEMPO as a failure to communicate and talk about something as important as ethics and your practical application of Core Values. There is evidence that our Sailors all know what Navy Core Values are, but few of them know what they truly mean...practically. We must do better to “operationalize” our values into practical decisions that are discussed and understood. We do this for safety. We do this for tactics. But we are failing to do this for the foundational values that set military service apart from most occupations. It is time for command triads to invigorate the practice of leading ethics-based case study discussions with the wardroom and Chief’s mess. This simple technique will not only provide your command practical training in general ethical reasoning, it will also visibly establish your unambiguous position on issues of character and allow you to model techniques to discuss these weighty issues. Our frenetic pace is not allowing the deeper, intellectual thought and reflection required to legitimately consider matters of ethics and moral development – and we allow this lack of prioritization at our own peril. Trust in a triad’s ability to properly lead is ultimately built upon issues of competence and character. We are good at training to competence...it’s time to give character more of our attention. I do not believe that 20-40% of our leaders are failing to uphold NCVs. However, evidence indicates that many leaders are not demonstrating enough care and concern about their Sailors to give issues of character and ethical decision-making the appropriate time and venue. To avoid an air of judgmentalism, in all humility I challenge leadership to seriously contemplate your professional responsibility to train, mentor, and model the very values that define our honorable profession.

To help you start this critical training in your wardroom, I recommend the “Ethics for Junior Officers” case study resources from the Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership. If you have thoughts or best practices related to this topic, please provide them directly to me -- and don’t sugar-coat it!

– CAPT Chuck Hollingsworth

CMC Corner

Chiefs abide by an uncompromising code of integrity, take full responsibility for their actions and keep their word. This will set a positive tone for the command, unify the Mess, and create esprit de corps.

The Chief community is provided many resources to guide and remind us of character and its use in leadership and decision making. Our Navy Ethos and Navy Core Values are examples of character references we should strive to follow. Exceptional character can go beyond the individual. Organizationally, we promote strong character as we strive to ensure mission accomplishment in a professional manner. Each of us possesses our own personal character and throughout our careers, it continues to be developed. Character can be improved through mentorship, study, genuine self reflection and application. But the aforementioned are simply words on paper unless we place our character into action. Each of us, no matter what our job, position, or daily task, should ask ourselves, “Where do I stand on the character scale, and if it is rightly placed, am I putting it to proper use?” It’s a fair question and one true leaders routinely pose to themselves.

– CMDCM Stephan Fontenot

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