

The Millennial Generation in the Military: Contemporary Challenges in Communication and the Case for Servant Leadership

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Introduction

For the past few years, the leading edge of a new generation of soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines have entered the military workforce. Known as millennials, they bring a unique set of expectations and attitudes related to the job, leading some experts to conclude that managing millennials is going to be more challenging than has been the case with previous generations. As many millennials are now approaching the end of their first enlistment, it is appropriate to examine whether the Navy's current leadership model is compatible with today's newest Sailor. The U.S. Navy provides an excellent case. The Navy's recent high-level concern over effectively recruiting and retaining millennial Sailors was evidenced in the Chief of Naval Personnel's (CNP) hosting of the Executive Life/Work Integration Summit as early as June 2007. The topic of Sailor life/work balance was the summit focus because life/work balance has been found to be significantly more important to millennials than has been the case with other generations of workers.

This has been shown in internal Navy surveys as well as in findings from private sector organizations and research. Summit participants, comprised of flag officers, senior civilians and senior enlisted leadership, discussed strategies designed to broaden and enhance the Navy's existing life/work integration policies and procedures.¹ The outcome of the summit was creation of Task Force Life/Work (TFLW) the mission of which is "developing and implementing policies, programs, and changes with the real potential to enhance our Sailor's life/work balance . . . while remaining true to meeting the Navy's mission requirements." This is to be achieved through the specific tasks of examining initiatives the Navy can influence now through policy, identifying efforts which require Department of Defense or congressional approval, and soliciting feedback from the fleet.² Creating, improving and integrating life/work balance measures, policies and processes are critical and progressive first steps in meeting what is recognized as a significant millennial job expectation. However, the actualization of life/work balance policies and processes will come from the actions of leadership at the unit level.

Who Are the Millennials?

Born from the early 1980s to today, these bright young men and women join three other generations in the workplace. Beyond an expectation for life/work balance, millennials bring to the job other attitudes – those viewpoints constructed through environmental observation – which are a product of profound societal and technological influences. These attitudes also must be recognized by the Navy and addressed through a contemporary and institutionalized leadership model if the Navy is to retain this contingent of young men and women. In general, millennials are heavy users of technology, have interacted with their peers in frequency and depth not seen in previous generations, have grown up with much more diversity, traveled more globally, and have a strong preference for experiential learning instead of the traditional classroom environment.³ Robert Wendover, Director of The Center for Generational Studies, says millennials have come of age in an era of mass media, technology, and convenience which have had a significant impact on their perceptions toward the workplace. He asserts that societal and political influences, such as corporate and political malfeasance, downsizings, and layoffs have taught millennials to challenge the system, doubt the judgment of managers, and not feel obligated in any way to one job or another.⁴

Furthermore, the strong technological influences and availability of cell phones, Personal Data Assistants (PDAs), and computers have created a "point-and-click, menu driven" mentality in millennials. Mr. Wendover has found that these influences contribute to millennials needing a much higher degree of direction, structure, and stimulating work environment than previous generations. This means supervisors, more than ever, need to model ethical and appropriate work behavior, be very specific in their directions, tell millennials why they are doing what they are doing and how they are doing while keeping them busy. This translates into more personalized attention and feedback to workers than has been the case in managing other generations.

Moreover, millennials are more likely than older workers to leave the organization if their needs are not being met. It is Mr. Wendover's belief that the entry of this newest generation into the workforce will require managers to modify their methods of supervision.⁵ This finding has significant implications for the Navy's current leadership model.

A Case for Servant Leadership

Over the past 30 years, the Navy has tinkered with a number of leadership styles including Management by Objectives (MBO), Leadership, Management, Education, and Training (LMET), Total Quality Leadership (TQL) and most recently situational leadership. While MBO, LMET, and TQL never achieved widespread acceptance, situational leadership has been around the Navy for over 10 years, experiencing a longer tenure than any of its predecessors. Situational leadership is classified by the Navy as its "leadership competency."⁶ The situational leadership model involves adapting leadership styles to different situations and people. At first blush, this seems like a logical approach given the Navy's transient, multi-generational, ethnically diverse workforce and various warfighting and peacetime roles and missions. However, the situational leadership model has been found to have a number of significant weaknesses. First, there is a lack of a strong body of published research which raises questions as to the validity of the approach itself; second, there is ambiguity about subordinate commitment levels as it relates to their development; third, there appears to be ambiguity as to how leader style is matched with the level of subordinate development; and, finally, situational leadership does not fully address the simultaneous adaptation of style to individual members and the group as a whole.⁷

These points combined with an absence of emphasis on personalized attention inherent in the model are of concern. After all, it is through personalized attention received in the form of direction, feedback, coaching, and professional development that the millennials will achieve job satisfaction and their job satisfaction is antecedent to their intent to remain with the organization. High satisfaction means high intent to remain while low satisfaction means low intent to remain. Therefore, the limitations inherent in the situational leadership approach raise significant questions regarding its effectiveness in leading and retaining the Navy's newest generation of Sailors.

Accordingly, the Navy's situational leadership paradigm needs to shift. The servant leadership approach provides a needed alternative. The servant leadership model, developed by Robert Greenleaf, is based on the notion that effective leadership emanates first and foremost through service to followers. It is this emphasis on service to the follower before self-interest and having an understanding of others that differentiates servant leadership from other models. The approach emphasizes ethical modeling, employee personal growth, teamwork and collaboration, caring behavior, and group decision making. The primary characteristic of a servant leader is a commitment to serving the needs of others followed by, among others, a commitment to the personal and professional growth of every employee in the organization, a reliance on persuasion rather than positional authority, empathy, foresight, and the ability to conceptualize without losing the day-to-day operational perspective.⁸

A couple of scenarios serve to strengthen the argument for servant leadership in the Navy. First, the Navy is a process, checklist, and plan-of-action-and-milestones- driven organization upon which most everything ranging from safe navigation to successful execution of major surface ship maintenance availabilities depends. The seven-volume Joint Fleet Maintenance Manual serves as such an example of the Navy's focus on policy, process, procedures, and standardization. The millennial Sailor will initially thrive in this environment because it is characterized by structure and specificity – easily embraced by a multi-tasking and menu driven mentality. Conversely, given the millennial's need for a stimulating work environment, supervisors will need to compliment these checklist-driven evolutions, programs and taskings with an interactive component in the form of their own interest and involvement in the daily activities and routine. Servant leadership is especially germane because of the professional development opportunities inherently present in any evolution or event.

Given their people-first orientation, Navy servant leaders would embrace every evolution as a training opportunity to enhance the professional development of their Sailors. Everything from the pre-underway checklist completed by the duty section to routine Planned Maintenance System (PMS) checks conducted by the Sailor to quality control checks and testing by ship's force in a shipboard maintenance availability would become, through personal involvement of the Chief, Division Officer, Command Duty Officer, etc. a learning opportunity directed at the *ongoing* professional qualification and overall personal proficiency of every Sailor. This would also capitalize on the millennial's preference toward experiential learning. As such, Chief Petty Officers, Division Officers, and Department Heads would need to spend less time behind their desks doing "admin" and more time on the deckplates training and engaging the troops.

Secondly, the Navy culture is notorious for its embodiment of a powerful work ethic where duty trumps all, including family. It is inevitable that any life/balance program, policy or process enacted by the Navy will come into conflict with the needs of the Navy at the unit level. The fickle nature of the pre-deployment workup cycle immediately comes to mind. And of course, the subsequent deployment itself is never truly predictable because operational schedules have always been moving targets. Further, in spite of the much-needed reductions in waterfront inspections accomplished in the late 1990s, many shipboard inspections remain. All of these examples relate directly to deployment readiness in support of the Global War on Terror. A case in point is the Navy's expanded role in the Middle East where Sailors are now helping ground forces fight the war in Iraq. To this end, servant leadership plays an important buffering and facilitating role in all of these contexts as Navy servant leaders would possess the critical combination empathy and foresight. Empathy enables the leader to understand the personal or family need of the Sailor while foresight and the ability to conceptualize enables the leader keep the potential impact on the Navy/Unit mission in perspective. Balance in decision making is thereby achieved in contrast to a biased focus on only one side of the issue. This is further aided by a servant leader's ability to conceptualize.

As previously stated, any new approaches by the Navy to expand and strengthen life/work integration must be balanced by remaining true to meeting the Navy's mission requirements. Servant leadership addresses the need for such organizational balance by advocating that leaders look at the big picture, conceptually so to speak, (in this case, retaining millennials) while, concurrently, keeping in perspective the day-to-day operational requirements (in this case, deployments, etc.). Having this balance of both conceptual and operational perspectives at all levels of leadership is another unique aspect of servant leadership. The applicability of servant leadership extends beyond the characteristics of the individual Sailor. From a contextual and organizational lifecycle perspective, scholars argue that the servant leadership approach works best in more stable external environments characterized by low dynamism and slow change processes with a focus on evolutionary as opposed to revolutionary changes. They believe that two components of servant leadership, concern for employees and their personal growth are especially significant when the organization enters the maturity stage.⁹ Comparatively speaking, the Navy's external environment can be classified as stable and the Navy continues in a mature phase of its ongoing organizational lifecycle.

Conclusion

To the Navy's credit, efforts are underway to expand knowledge of the generational differences beyond just the implementation of TFWL. For example, Naval Facilities Engineering Command (NAVFAC) offers a Dale Carnegie course called *Managing Across Generations*.¹⁰ While education is an important piece to leadership's understanding of millennials, what is missing is an accompanying salient institutional leadership model. The Navy needs more than a "leadership competency" in the 21st century. It has been correctly asserted that the Navy does not have an institutionalized leadership model and the absence of this model has led to a broad variation in leadership styles within the Navy.¹¹ Arguably, the situational leadership "competency" must be replaced by a clearly defined leadership model, program and philosophy that meet current needs. The entry of the millennials underscores this need in the Navy for an institutionalized leadership model more than ever.

According to *The Naval Officers Guide* (8th Edition), "The key to successful naval leadership is personal attention and supervision based on moral responsibility."¹² The servant leadership approach embodies these attributes and is a good fit for today's Sailor and the Navy's organizational context. Moreover, Chief of Naval Operations Mike Mullen recently mentioned the value he places on strong leadership.¹³ The institutionalization of servant leadership in the Navy will provide such value and strength as a guiding model and philosophy which will prove highly effective in leading and retaining the Navy's newest and most complex generation of Sailor.

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Notes

- ¹ LCDR Kim Dixon, "Navy Leadership Works Together to Address Life/Work Integration Issues," *NavyNewStand*, retrieved 6 June 2007 from the World Wide Web: http://news.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story_id=30153.
- ² "Task Force Life/ Work," Navy Administrative Message (NAVADMIN) 159/2007, 19 June 2007, retrieved 28 June 2007 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.npc.navy.mil/NR/rdonlyres/54B3FC8B-C9C4-4CD4-843E-CB4C07901AF2/0/NAV07159.txt>
- ³ Richard T. Sweeney of the New Jersey Institute of Technology conducted more than 20 millennial focus groups, one of which contained military personnel. See his "Reinventing Library Buildings and Services for the Millennial Generation," *Library Administration & Management*, Fall 2005, vol. 19, issue 4, retrieved 02 July 2007 from the World Wide Web: <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did996141921&sid=2&Fmt=4&clientId=10553&RQT=309&VName=PQD>
- ⁴ The Center for Generational Studies is a research and training organization located in Aurora, Colorado. See their website at <http://www.gentrends.com> for excellent discussion and resources on generations in the workplace.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ The Naval Facilities Engineering Command and Commander, Navy Region Southwest command training websites list situational leadership as a supervisory/leadership competency in their online training course catalog. See the Naval Facilities Command site at http://totalforcetraining.navfac.navy.mil/course_catalog_competency.asp? and Commander, Navy Region Southwest site at <http://www.cnrsw.navy.mil/hrocnsw/training/Leadership%20and%20management%20training%20guide.doc>
- ⁷ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (2nd Ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2001.
- ⁸ See Larry Spears (Ed.) *Reflections on Leadership*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1995.
- ⁹ Brien N. Smith, Ray V. Montagno, Tatiana N. Kuzmenko, "Transformational and Servant Leadership: Content and Contextual Comparisons," *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, Spring 2004, Vol. 10, Issue 4. retrieved 20 July 2007 from the World Wide Web: <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=692436991&sid=1&Fmt=4&clientId=10553&RQT=309&VName=PQD>
- ¹⁰ See Naval Facilities Engineering Command website on the World Wide Web at http://totalforcetraining.navfac.navy.mil/competency_course_detail.asp?course=203&title=Situational%20Leadership&competency_number=AA:SUP:01
- ¹¹ See Capt. Allan A Banghardt, *Navy Leadership: Is Something Missing?*, The Industrial College of the Armed Forces of the Armed Forces Executive Research Project F27 (1995) retrieved 20 July 2007 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.ndu.edu/library/ic6/95-F-27.pdf>
- ¹² RAdm Arthur A. Ageton and VAdm William P. Mack, *The Naval Officer's Guide* (8th Ed.), Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1976, p. 143.
- ¹³ MCS2 Tim Wightman, "CNO Outlines Navy Operations at Sea and Ashore," *Navy Newsstand*, retrieved 23 July 2007 from the World Wide Web: http://www.news.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story_id=30699