

Naval Safety Command

Risk Awareness: Human Factors & Risk Mindset



Human factors remain one of the most persistent contributors to mishaps across the Naval Enterprise. Fatigue, complacency, stress, overconfidence, and communication breakdowns often serve as the underlying conditions that lead to operational failure – not the visible act itself. Even within strong systems, human limitations can undermine mission success. Recognizing this reality and integrating it into command culture is vital to maintaining both readiness and safety.

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Human factors must be actively addressed as part of a unit's risk management posture. Leaders at the executive level shape the operational environment, set behavioral expectations, and model the importance of awareness, accountability, and communication. Risk mindset is not instinctual – it is cultivated.

Why Leadership Presence Matters

Human performance is deeply influenced by leadership tone and example. When leaders are present, attentive, and receptive, they create an environment where early warning signs are recognized and addressed. A consistent leadership presence:

- Build psychological safety for reporting concerns.
- Reinforces expectations of vigilance and procedural discipline
- Normalizes operational pause for risk evaluation, even under pressure.

Real Life Examples

- Live-Fire Mishaps
- On-Duty Negligent Discharge
- Amphibious Combat Vehicle Mishaps
- Fall Related Mishaps
- Heat Stress Mishaps
- Firearm Safety



Marines Participate in a Maritime Operators Course

Embedding a Risk Mindset

Risk mindset is more than checking boxes or repeating slogans. It's a cultural shift that takes time, modeling, and reinforcement. Leaders can support its development by:

- Encouraging open discussion about near-misses and close calls – not as punishment, but as learning tools.
- Elevating conversations about human limitations into daily routines, watch turnover, and post-event debriefs.
- Ensuring operational demands do not suppress safety signals or silence concerns.

Indicators of Human Factor Risk

Senior leaders should remain alert to the following systemic signs:

- Increased minor errors or near-miss reports.
- Hesitation in raising concerns or inconsistent debrief quality
- Overreliance on high performers or signs of operational fatigue.
- Lack of clarity around intent, tasking, or decision authority.

Commanders have the ability – and responsibility – to influence how human factors are perceived, discussed, and mitigated. The difference between a learning organization and a reactive one is leadership's willingness to examine the human element not as a flaw, but as a predictable factor that must be accounted for and supported.

Risk-aware units don't wait for mishaps to find root causes. They build systems that notice the cracks before they widen.



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