

KNOW YOUR PEOPLE

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U.S. Navy photo by
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All leaders, regardless of employment sector, are responsible for ensuring their subordinates have the proper skills, tools and knowledge to optimally perform their assigned tasks. This accountability is especially true for military leaders and members responsible for protecting the nation and its interests, often without the required tools, knowledge and experience. One must also remember enlisted Sailors perform the bulk of work in the Navy. If Sailors are not adequately prepared, mission completion and national security will be at risk. Enlisted ratings cover a wide range of career areas, from cryptology to construction and nuclear operations to special operations.

When Sailors know leaders have their back, it has a significant impact on morale, work quality and overall team cohesion. The same applies in reverse; when leaders know Sailors have their back, it helps them become better leaders. One only needs to examine the many past mishap reports to see there usually were precursory problems within the team when either Sailors, leaders or both failed to have each other's back. Even in commands with issues such as these, there are ways to right the ship.

A prime example of mitigation tactics can be found in the published story of how Capt. D. Michael Abrashoff worked with his crew on the USS Benfold (DDG 65) to completely turn around one of the Navy's worst-performing ships to becoming one of the best operating Navy vessels in less than three years. The comeback story of the USS Benfold is proof that leader-Sailor relationships are essential to optimal unit operations.

It behooves leaders to be fully aware of and follow the Navy's 11 Leadership Principles, especially principle No. 3, Know your people and look out for their welfare. However, just knowing who your subordinates are is not sufficient for optimal results. Knowing their name, rank and duties helps in assigning duties, but it doesn't give the details a leader needs to really know their Sailors, nor does it facilitate looking out for their welfare. Leaders must build a relationship with their Sailors, not to cross the good order and discipline boundary, but to know each of their Sailor's strengths, weaknesses, skills known and needed, work ethic, job performance factors and life challenges off-duty. A good example of something important for a leader to know is how each Sailor prefers to perform work, either working alone or in teams.

Every Sailor completes a military entrance processing station pre-acceptance evaluation and if accepted, attends basic training. Successful basic training participants become members of a unique group - bonding over their career choice and Navy Core Values of Honor, Courage and Commitment, as well as their willingness to sacrifice to protect our glorious nation.

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Each Sailor is also extensively tested on skills, interests and other critical factors, which assists in determining duty assignments. Unfortunately, most of this critical information is summarized and not very helpful in leader-Sailor relationship-building, or getting to know Sailors as people and team members. Additionally, the Navy focuses on developing the skills needed to fulfill military duties and later to prepare Sailors for employment after separation, but this is a work in progress.



U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Kyle Merritt

Leaders must be cognizant of Sailor knowledge and skill regarding their duties – both to ensure successful and safe duty completion and to keep morale and work quality at optimal levels.

While building relationships and knowing your Sailors is necessary, it's even more important to pay close attention to their mental health. It is also very important that leaders are cognizant of their own mental health. Military personnel have higher rates of mental health issues than many other occupations, partially as a result of sacrifices they make to serve. Factors such as team member or co-worker losses, last-minute deployments, duty assignment changes, being “stuck” on the water for months with insufficient crew and tools, which is improving but it's still a problem, and being away from loved ones. In fact, the “worst ship in the Navy” story shows what happens when a ship operates for years with too few Sailors, many who lacked the training they needed; working extra hours with no breaks or sleep, working with damaged or missing required tools, equipment, software, etc.; and having overworked and sometimes incompetent leadership. Among other dangerous incidents occurring, ship and crew deterioration also caused rampant mental health issues throughout the crew and leadership.

Under Abrashoff's leadership style, which is taught in Navy leadership courses, his first activities were getting to know the crew, making duty and other changes to meet Sailor needs, engaging senior Navy leaders to get needed repairs, tools, equipment, additional experienced crew and more time to train. His actions convinced his crew he valued them as more than just Sailors, encouraging them to join his efforts. This resulted in the USS Benfold and crew becoming the model Navy ship in less than three years. It also proved that Sailors and leaders working well together and knowing they can depend on each other is a great way to improve overall mental health because those who might need help are often afraid of the potential stigma attached to seeking help.

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To recap, a most critical leadership function and principle is knowing your people and protecting their welfare – cohesive leader-worker teamwork with well-valued Sailors is the foundation for safe, effective and efficient operations. To truly know Sailors, leaders must know more about their needs and desires, what tasks and qualifications their jobs entail, and be flexible but always reward performance appropriately or provide guidance as needed. Above all, leaders should pay close attention to their Sailors' mental health while also monitoring their own. If leaders and their Sailors work together, they can help each other maintain good mental health and optimally running units and crews – a win-win for all: our Sailors, leaders and our nation.