**Ask The Chief**

*By Chief Electronic Warfare Technician Robert S. Lanham, U.S. Navy*

In today's smaller Navy, on ships that are not fully manned, chief petty officers must regain their reputations as the sea-going professionals with the answers.

"It was our intent to impress upon you that challenge is good; a great and necessary reality which cannot mar you--which, in fact, strengthens you. In your future as a Chief Petty Officer, you will be forced to endure adversity far beyond that imposed upon you today. You must face each challenge and adversity with the same dignity and good grace you demonstrated today."

--from the Chief Petty Officer Creed

These words never have been more true than they are in today's ever-changing environment. Every naval publication has presented countless articles, opinion columns, and facts and figures designed to assess the impact of "rightsizing" on our forces. But few, if any, have addressed the most troubling change to occur in recent years--the erosion of the trust and autonomy given to our chief petty officers. Established in September 1894, the rating of chief petty officer has accorded its members a position of esteem and respect unequaled by comparable ratings in the other services. Traditionally, chiefs have been given free rein with regard to the supervision and direction of their divisions. Management and the disposition of personnel and material assets are the chief's domain. Do you need a part, a school, special liberty, or career advice? "Ask the chief!" always has been the standard response, from the newest seaman recruit to the commanding officer.

But all of that is changing. The seventh edition of The Division Officer's Guide, published more than 20 years ago, addresses the crux of the matter in unusually candid terms. "It has always been a widespread complaint in the Navy, on the part of senior petty officers, that the junior officers are usurping their duties. Some of this is justified; eager young officers often step into details of supervision that can offend the old chiefs who are then tempted to retire to the [chief petty officer] mess and drink coffee." So why is this still happening today?

First, the drawdown of officers, particularly in the surface warfare community, has created a very unhealthy level of competition among junior members. This one-upmanship has fostered a climate of self-promotion that undermines the ideals of teamwork and delegation. No longer are young division officers satisfied to pass tasks down to the chief for prioritization and accomplishment; officers now feel the need to do everything themselves to prove their mettle. In addition to tackling all divisional requirements, hard-charging junior officers are likely taking on a myriad of collateral duties that serve to dilute their energies further.

Second, the advent of the personal computer as a shipboard mainstay has resulted in greater autonomy in the day-to-day operations of a division, decreasing or negating the requirement for "hands-on" leadership in many evolutions. Subjects such as damage control, maintenance, materials management, and in-rate training, which were traditionally overseen by chief petty officers in an on-the-job-training environment, are now learned by young sailors through onboard trainers or other PC-based programs. While possessing many advantages, this technological progress has had the unfortunate consequence of significantly reducing the personal interaction between chief petty officers and junior personnel once deemed vital to sailors' professional development.

Finally, some--if not most--of the blame rests with us chiefs. There are many in our ranks who seem to have forgotten from where we have come. Positive leadership and taking care of our people have given way to high-visibility political maneuvering designed to land oneself on the next promotion list. No longer can chiefs be counted on to provide a sanity check on key issues affecting our sailors. Instead, many chiefs have become afflicted with the "bobbing-head doll syndrome," whereby our responses to any suggestions or directions from the upper echelon are a vigorous nodding of the head, regardless of the impact on personnel or equipment. As a mess, we have checked our backbones at the door, seemingly eschewing the straightforward, tell-it-like-it-is leadership that resulted in our selection as chief petty officers in the first place. So how do we attack these challenges and regain our long-standing role as the key players in day-to-day shipboard operations?

For starters, we should refocus on our primary role as trainers of junior officers. Emphasis should be placed not just on division officers, but also on department heads and even executive officers, particularly those at the lieutenant commander level. During my tour as company chief at the Naval Academy, I tried to impress upon midshipmen that the primary job of the chiefs is to make the division officers successful. We do this not by letting them become inundated with an avalanche of administrative requirements and collateral duties, but rather by teaching them the fine arts of prioritization and delegation. Mutual respect is imperative to establishing the open lines of communication necessary to achieve this goal. Recognizing the attributes each brings to the table will build a professional relationship that will not only benefit the junior officers and chiefs, but subordinates as well. Teamwork and cooperation, based on trust, foster a working environment in which forthright communication of ideas up and down the chain of command is encouraged. Such a climate enhances the training effectiveness of the chiefs and accelerates the professional development of the junior officers, resulting in dramatically increased command efficiency.

Next, chief petty officers must be visible. Allowing ourselves to become welded to desks only ensures the accelerated deterioration of our importance as perceived by seniors and subordinates. The presence and total involvement of an experienced chief guarantees the success of any evolution. However, increasing numbers of chiefs seem to have lost that sense of personal pride and responsibility in maintaining the highest levels of personnel and equipment readiness--levels that are attained only through leadership by presence. To reverse this trend, we need strong, active leadership from the command master chiefs. A command master chief who is moving about the decks, keeping a finger on the pulse of the command while ensuring support of the chief's mess from the commanding officer and executive officer, will act as a catalyst to drive the chief petty officer organization to a higher standard of leadership and command involvement. Much as a ship's crew mirrors its captain, so does a chief's mess mirror the command master chief.

We also need to get back to our roots and remember what being "the chief" is all about. We chiefs are all wearing khakis today because, somewhere along the way, a chief petty officer took us aside and put us on the right path, either with encouraging words or a well-placed boot to the rear. Those chiefs cared enough about us (and the future of the Navy) to invest the time necessary to ensure that we would realize our potential. It is imperative that we continue this tradition by recognizing junior sailors who are career-oriented and making a concerted effort to mentor them, instilling in them the sense of personal pride and service to country necessary to excel in our profession. An excellent step in this direction was the initiative begun by former Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy John Hagan, who established a reading list of materials dealing with the heritage and history of our Navy. By adopting and espousing the ideals exemplified by great naval leaders, enlisted and officer alike, we can educate junior personnel in our traditions, motivating them to internalize the values of honor, courage, and commitment--without which we will surely deteriorate into an irreversible state of ineptitude.

We must embrace the "ship, shipmate, self" concept of prioritization. Many seem to have a rice-bowl mentality, focusing energies and efforts in their own areas of expertise while ignoring the repercussions of their decisions on command goals. The line of thought is, "As long as my division looks good, I'm not concerned about anyone else." This self-centered style of leadership is eroding the foundation of team spirit and camaraderie which made our Navy great. As chiefs, it is our responsibility to keep the big picture in focus, managing our personnel and equipment to get the most out of every sailor's contribution to accomplish the command mission. By knowing where our divisional piece fits into the departmental and command puzzle, we can fully support all mission areas without compromising performance quality in specific areas of responsibility.

Chiefs must be willing to extend a helping hand to shipmates when the need arises. Too often the tendency today is to be excuse-oriented instead of action-oriented. When assistance is requested or directed in accomplishing a major evolution, the immediate response most often is a laundry list of reasons why we cannot provide support. Action-oriented management dictates aggressive deployment of personnel to support shipboard requirements to the fullest extent possible. For example, the onloading of stores typically requires divisions to provide predetermined numbers of bodies per the ship's instructions to form working parties. Instead, I challenge fellow chiefs to make these all-hands evolutions. I have tried it on the duty-section level, with great results. The logic is clear: everyone eats food, sodas, or milk, and purchases toiletries and other items from the ship's store. After the initial obligatory griping and groaning phase, it quickly becomes evident that the job gets done much quicker when all hands turn to, and what goes around, comes around. In other words, when I need help you'll be there for me. Of course, this system works only when it actually is an all-hands evolution. Nothing gains respect and maximizes the efforts of subordinates like seeing the senior petty officers and chiefs actively involved.

As we move into the 21st century, it is vital that we chief petty officers take seriously our role in today's Navy. Chiefs must lead by example and presence. Our total commitment to the Navy's core values is non-negotiable. The future of our country, our Navy, and our shipmates--even the very existence of our Navy as we know it--hangs in the balance. As the Chief Petty Officer Creed states, "For over 100 years, Chiefs before you have freely accepted responsibility beyond the call of printed assignment." The time has come for us to heed that same call and declare, "Attention on deck, this is the chief, I have the conn."

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Submitted, "Fair Seas with Following Winds" YNCS Don Harribine, USN(Ret)