

"Here we go again," he thought as he got ready for another day at the CO/XO course at Navy Leadership and Ethics Center (NLEC). A couple of years ago, it was **Get Real Get Better (GRGB)**, now it's **Culture of Excellence (COE) 2.0**. Another set of Big Navy requirements getting pushed down on the shoulders of Commanding Officers. "When will it ever stop?"

However, as the morning presentation went on, he noticed four things that were different, and perhaps better.

First, it all kind of made sense: **Great People** do need **Great Leaders** to become **Great Teams**, and it is a no brainer that leaders have to be deliberate about helping our people become more **tough and resilient**. If we *have* to take deliberate care of our machines and systems, then we *have* to take deliberate care of our people.

Second, Navy wasn't picking a new term, or even new things. Instead, they were taking things that were already in existence and making them better... leveraging data and science... **being transparent about shortcomings and striving to improve**.

Third, everything he knew about **GRGB** was in **COE 2.0**. The expectations for GRGB leadership behaviors were elevated by linking them to character (**be transparent**) and competence (**self-assessing and correcting**), as was the goal to **build learning teams through trust and respect**. When he looked down on the placemat, there it was, the **N-PIER handbook**: tools for problem solving.

Last, Navy was deliberate to provide commands tools. From the placemat to the playbook to the **Virtual CO's Suggestion Box** and **Commander's Risk Mitigation Dashboard**, Navy was making things easier to understand and more effective in execution.

He started that day a skeptic and walked out willing to give it a try (especially since COE 2.0 was part of the **Command Climate Assessment (CCA) ISIC debrief**, starting with the 2024 annual window).

En route to his command, he read and reread the placemat and playbook, and decided to give **page 5** a try (though like many, he wished there was a checklist for building great culture!).

Upon arrival, he asked about the last CCA, and scanned through it... learning that since the CCA ISIC debrief, no one was actively tracking the command's **Plan of Action and Milestones**. He noted only two of eight items were accomplished.

Next, he looked at his command through the lens of the placemat. As he walked around, there were clearly some divisions that were knocking it out of the park: positive energy, with people looking at you in the eye... but there were some that were different, where it seemed like they were putting on a show, or just flat out not getting things done. One of these divisions had been called out, negatively, in the CCA.

When he used the questions on the **back of the placemat to further self-assess**, there were clearly areas to get better. One area he found was that none of the Triad were checking out Sailors (officer or enlisted) when they left the command, to get a sense of how things went during their tour.

He asked to attend **Command Indoctrination** and found it to be an energy draining event, though was heartened in meeting their Command Fitness Leader. As they chatted after the session, he was struck by her contagious passion for making the command more **physically ready for combat**... and learned of her frustration that they hadn't done command PT since she checked onboard more than 18 months ago.

Overall, there wasn't anything that was horribly broken, and the command was doing ok, but it just seemed like there wasn't the level of buy-in across the board... like they were driving around in a five speed that couldn't get out of third gear.

But where to start? He spoke with the XO and CMC about what he learned, and after some initial pushback, got to the point where they both admitted that the weight of all the requirements overwhelmed their best intentions to create positive change.

And so they started with each other, committing to at least a half hour a week where they would talk first about how each other was doing, and then talk about some element of COE 2.0. It was hard at first, but then it started to stick (they were becoming their own version of Coach Lasso's "Diamond Dogs"). Once a month, they would review their **CRMD**, and while not

everything was fixable, it was a reminder of where there was risk for harmful behaviors and their team.

To steer the conversation, they made the decision to become, by the back of the placemat, a 100% good... occasionally better or best... command. They started at the top with **Onboarding** and then worked through **Toughness and Prevention**, and onto **Listening & Acting**, dividing and conquering.

As the triad worked through these programs and processes, they did it in a way that encouraged learning. No meeting started with "fix this" - instead, they started with the very **tenets of problem solving**: What is our baseline performance? Can we measure it? Why is it this way? What ideas do you have for making it better? Where do you need the assistance of the triad? When should we talk again about your program?

As they did so, they came to realize the untapped talent within the command. Program managers were empowered and enabled to make a difference. The command was practicing the act of actively building each other up, ready to swarm if anyone needed help or assistance. They took each of the **12 Warrior Toughness Skills** and covered one a month... watching the operating system of the command begin to change.

That said, it didn't come without hard spots.

As they were going through the CCA, they realized that they hadn't followed up on a hostile work environment in one of their shops. Unfortunately, when the **Command Resiliency Team** did a follow-up focus group, they learned that one of the leaders had become more hostile and toxic. A letter of instruction was then provided, with a deliberate plan for follow-up.

And, they were sad to learn that one of their best and brightest came forward with a suicidal ideation. It was surprising, no one expected it, but the command was glad they did come forward and was ready to respond. Every Chief Petty Officer or higher had the back of the **Mental Health Playbook** filled out, and the Command Duty Officers were well-rehearsed with **Response Plans** (playbook p. 25).

As he was chopping the 5060 for Change of Command, he heard the familiar ding of a **Virtual CO's Suggestion Box** email coming into his que (set up in Outlook for these to be different than other emails). Over time, he had come to have a love-hate relationship with these emails. They were often hard-hitting,

but they gave the triad an opportunity to address some real needs in the command.

In opening the email, a smile came to his face,

"I know you get a bunch of these with negative comments. But, I wanted to just say thanks. This command is getting better. Now, I even want to come to work. Thank you for showing that you care."