



## Self-Talk and Success: The Motivation of Performance Statements

**“Rise and grind.”**

**“I trained for this. Let’s go!”**

**W**hen the pressure hits, what a person says to themselves matters. Self-talk becomes more than words. It becomes a driver of performance. In those moments, the use of a short, meaningful phrase can shift one’s mindset from failure to success. This article explores the connection between performance statements, self-talk, and confidence.



A Sailor on a ship pushing the word NOT overboard

## Performance Statements

Performance statements are short, positive phrases that individuals say to themselves as a method of regulating feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Because mindset, motivation, and performance are tied together, a person's thoughts directly influence their behavior and consequently impact how they perform.

These phrases help maintain focus and peak performance during stressful situations. When a person believes they can accomplish a task, it improves the likelihood of success. Alternatively, if a person doubts themselves or thinks they are not equipped to handle a task, their performance will likely be diminished. Performance statements counter self-doubt and cue the brain to respond instead of react.

## Self-Talk and Stress

Self-talk is the way people talk to themselves, out loud or in their heads. This inner dialogue reflects one's thoughts, beliefs, and experiences and can be positive, negative, or neutral.

Self-talk affects a person's reactions and behavior, especially in moments of stress.

"When we're under pressure, our cognitive load increases, which means that cortisol

levels can increase in the brain," explains CDR Kevin Naughton. "This results in our brains having much less mental bandwidth to process things like decisions, emotions, and even physical execution. We practice performance statements that can help shift our mental state."

Structured, deliberative self-talk activates regions of the brain, like the prefrontal cortex, and reduces cortisol levels.

This promotes focus on breathing, enhances motor control, and supports clearer decision-making.



Self-talk helps reframe the moment. People need to be mindful of their negative statements and when they feel they can't do something or they think they're going to fail, reframe their thinking into a "What can I learn?" mindset.

CDR Kevin Naughton

## Tuning In to Self-Talk

Most people do not realize the impact of their thoughts. Building awareness of self-talk enables a person to intervene when thoughts begin to negatively impact performance. Ways to improve one's awareness include practicing mindfulness, examining how their thoughts affect mood and behavior, and looking for patterns.

According to CDR Kevin Naughton, "Being self-aware, in general, is a great skill to have in our toolkit. The more self-aware we are of how we respond to stress, complicated relationships, or tricky assignments at work, the more that also helps us understand what kind of help we need to seek out from others.

Feedback from people that you trust can be powerful in helping you understand what your own self-talk is. Self-talk sometimes, and especially in our own heads, doesn't have any words.

It's more of a feeling. It's more of a mentality. It's believing you're going to fail without even saying to yourself, "This is just going to be like last time." But others who observe you can be really powerful in helping you understand what your self-talk is, being more aware of it, and how you can hopefully change it."



A Sailor in the center of four Effective Performance Statements: Brief, Helpful, Instructive, and Realistic

## Reflection to Readiness

To create a strong performance statement, a person should think about a past high-stress event and ask themselves what thoughts, emotions, and words helped or hindered. Objective evaluation of the situation, self-talk, and outcome help determine what kind of statements will encourage, or discourage, their success in the future.

Adding performance statements to mental rehearsal and using them with visualization makes them even stronger. These statements should match the person's role and mindset. Some phrases can be built for specific situations, but general ones such as "I am prepared" and "I can do this" apply to diverse situations.

## Effective Performance Statements

Four key elements form the foundation of strong performance statements.

**Brief:** A performance statement is usually short and easy to recall, like a mantra or slogan. It needs to be said when someone is mentally and/or physically exhausted. A classic example is "Just do it" from Nike. "Let's roll" or "I've got this" are other catchy phrases that can motivate a person to achieve under pressure.

**Instructive:** These short phrases are meant to help a person talk themselves through to the desired outcome and should focus on what they want to happen versus what they want to avoid.

While some individuals may respond well to negative statements, positive performance statements are generally more effective in promoting success. Clear, goal-oriented phrases like "Keep moving" instead of "Don't stop" can make a difference in one's energy and focus.

**Realistic:** A performance statement should be realistic rather than overly ambitious. It must feel believable and achievable, especially under stress. Effective performance statements account for an individual's skills, training, and abilities, ensuring expectations align with capabilities. For example, "You can do anything" makes a poor performance statement because not every Sailor has the knowledge or expertise to carry out every task.

**Helpful:** The goal of performance statements is to redirect the train of thought from unhelpful to helpful, breaking the negative self-talk loop. This is where performance statements become individualized. These statements personally motivate and support a Sailor. What might work for one person may not work for another.

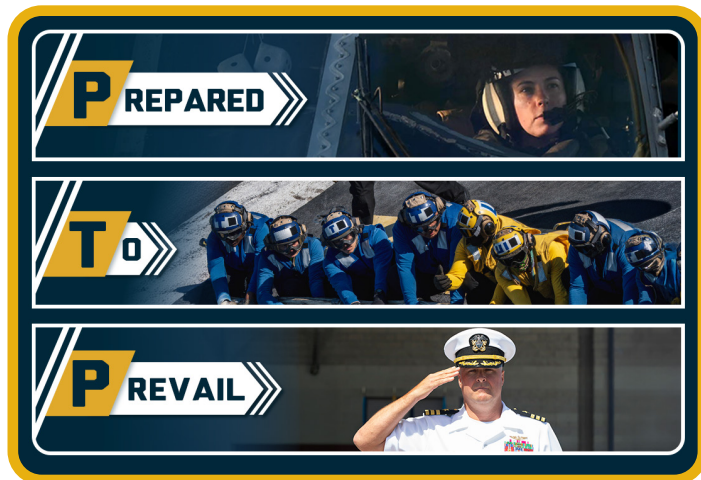
## Personalized Performance Statements

The best performance statements are personal. Sailors should think about words or phrases that motivate, inspire, or reaffirm their effort, capabilities, and will-to-win. These phrases should come naturally and feel right to say.

Using one's favorite song lyrics, movie quotes, phrases, or even names can make performance statements more powerful and easier to remember. They should replace negative or restrictive thoughts with positive motivators that keep the Sailor in the fight.

## Preparing for Pressure

People should create and practice performance statements before encountering high-pressure situations. This preparation allows the brain to quickly recall the right words when stress or doubt appears.



A Sailor, team, and Commander with Prepared To Prevail title



Our internal dialogue influences how our brains process information and how it regulates emotion, preparing us to execute in combat or an emergency.

CDR Kevin Naughton

By anticipating potential challenges, individuals can prepare phrases that keep them calm, confident, and motivated under pressure.

## Across the Fleet

Performance statements increase motivation in high-pressure situations and can be utilized at every level in the Navy.

On an individual level, performance statements help a Sailor stay focused, confident, and in control during stressful moments. They reduce anxiety, improve self-talk, and boost performance by reinforcing belief in one's abilities.

When team members use performance statements, they build a shared mindset of readiness, motivation, and trust.

This leads to stronger teamwork, better communication, and improved performance under pressure.

At the command level, performance statements support a culture of mental toughness and mission focus. Commands that promote this practice increase morale, resilience, and operational readiness.

## Words That Win

Performance statements help Sailors stay mentally engaged, mission-ready, and in control of their environment. Repeating powerful, personal phrases builds belief in oneself and helps reduce stress and anxiety during high-pressure situations. This leads to better focus, improved effectiveness, and a stronger mindset when it matters most.

## Performance Mindset

Performance statements reinforce the Warrior Mindset by focusing the mind on the desired outcome. Commitment to maintaining awareness of self-talk leads to optimized performance under pressure. Practicing and using positive self-talk in predetermined performance statements keeps Sailors ready. Implementing strong performance statements sharpens focus when it is time to act. Reflecting on performance allows Sailors to identify their strengths and weaknesses, enabling them to adjust their self-talk for continuous improvement.

## Standing on Business

Below is a story from CMDCM Samira McBride about making a performance statement relatable to all levels of a command.

“We have to remember that we all come from different walks of life. We all have different experiences. We’re all raised differently, and we all respond to different things.

A command level performance statement has to be real, and leaders have to tailor it to everyone around them and to all levels at the command. It is not just leadership versus junior people. Sailors have to know how to move those around them to meet the task.

A CO got on the IMC one day and said, ‘By the way, I stand on business.’ I didn’t know how much that resonated, but next thing you know ‘standing on business’ became the personality of the ship and it’s because he was relatable to the most junior person.

They understood because it’s from a song and in their mind the captain listens to those songs. They were loyal to him after that. It’s those small things that connect leadership with the people. Believe so that you can get them to the finish line, even if they don’t believe in themselves. Believe that they can face the challenges.

Everyone’s job is important and once everyone recognizes their role and understands the situation, it’s a beautiful thing. Everyone comes together and you will always meet the mission, but it starts with being true and transparent. Just be a human and then you can relate to humans and then you can achieve big goals. Standing on business.”

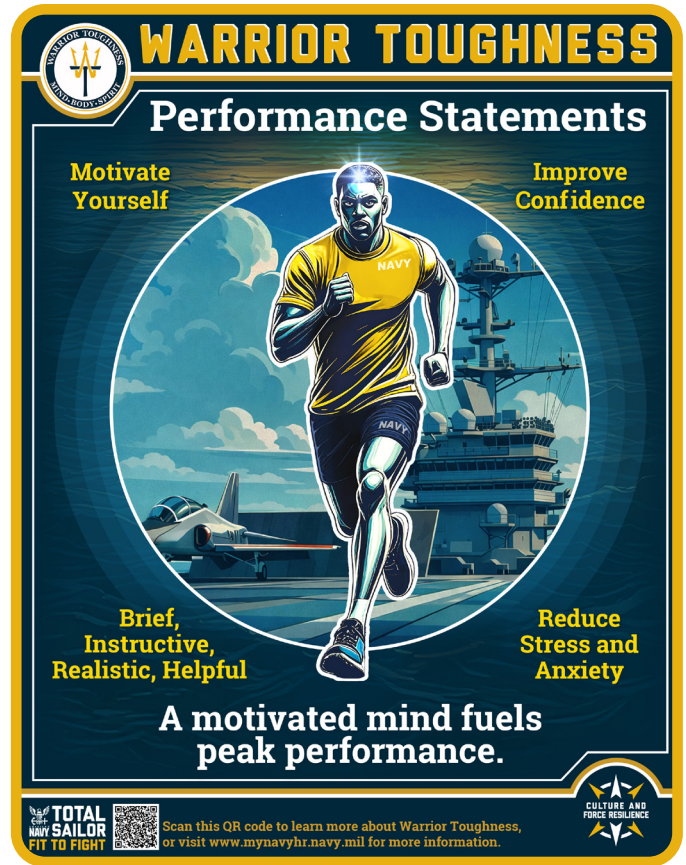


A Sailor maintaining focus and a Sailor executing in combat

## Wrap-Up

Performance statements provide Sailors with a simple, powerful tool designed to help them stay calm, ready, and focused.

By practicing these brief, instructive, realistic, and helpful statements regularly, Sailors can improve their self-talk, which boosts confidence, increases motivation, and supports peak performance. Positive self-talk fuels mission success.



Warrior Toughness Performance Statements infographic

For more information, check out the videos and podcast about Performance Statements.



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