

# Mission Ready

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## Leadership Fundamentals and Getting Back to One of The Basics: - Communication -

A Guest article by: **CDR Carl R. Nelman, CEC, USNR (Ret.)**

During my very first few freshman days of Navy ROTC we young kids had impressed upon us the knowledge that "getting out and about in our spaces" would become a sacred obligation as newly-minted junior officers. The reasons given for this were to meet our sailors, get to know our sailors, and let our sailors get to know us. Both implicitly and explicitly, we were to learn their strengths and weaknesses. Moreover we were enlightened that getting out and about would ensure we saw and evaluated with our own eyes the physical conditions in which our sailors worked and lived. We were taught that within the context of Good Naval Leadership this particular activity was critical to efficiency, effectiveness, and morale.

From my now-retired vantage point I more fully understand and appreciate what my instructors were actually saying. Yet "hearing it" and "living it" are two wholly unconnected experiences. As a small-town-boy and 18-year-old midshipman I can assure you I hadn't a clue of the importance of this activity, no matter how many times the ROTC unit Chief Petty Officer whapped me over the head. And as a 22-year-old ensign I likewise received many of the same "learning experiences" from the many shipboard Chiefs.

Not that I or my classmates were dense but much time must pass to actually live within the experience to fully understand and absorb and infuse within oneself the innate and unexplainable mysteries of this responsibility. Until a person gets past the simple "doing" of this seemingly trivial task and begins to understand at the gut level its overwhelming importance to morale and effectiveness and good order and discipline, well, the task remains just another line item on the to-do list.

I found in the 01 August 2004 issue of Government Executive magazine an incredible statistic. A question was posed to 500 managers by Bruce Tulgan, "How often do you talk to employees about what you expect of them, monitor their performance, provide feedback, and reward or admonish them accordingly...."

Mr. Tulgan reports, "Only 1 percent of managers covered all the bases with all their employees every day.... 65 percent did so only at least once per year...."

Also, ".... one in three managers ....didn't fulfill their basic management duties even once a year."

"Back To Basics" by Bruce Friel:

<http://www.govexec.com/features/0804-01/0804-01managematters.htm>

An extraordinary 1% "gets out and about" every day; only 5 out of 500 !! As I read and re-read the article within the

context of Good Naval Leadership I perceive that those 5 managers have somehow been inculcated with an abiding burden to speak with their people every single day. Was it due to a military background ?? If so, bravo for them. If not, how then might a civilian come by this burden ?? That is to say, who in that civilian's life would have mentored him/her with the knowledge that a daily meeting is necessary and worthwhile??

5 out of 500. Those 5 by their action implicitly inform their employees that they (the employees) are incredibly important. Those 5 inform their employees, without saying a word, that they (the managers) do not believe their own busy schedule is more important than the employee. Those 5 inform their employees that daily communication (up and down the chain) is vital and critical. Those 5 inform their employees that the easiest daily task to accomplish (to not have a daily meeting) is not the task which will be accomplished on that day or any day.

I will relate by personal example one very important aspect of meeting often with your sailors/troopers/employees: building and maintaining morale. I have personally been associated with two projects where I was generally left alone. The boss had set the ultimate goal (design & build and & deliver hardware). But I was never included into the daily life of the group. No regular meetings or reports, no e-mails, no phone calls, no communication. Initially this was quite nice but what I soon discovered was a feeling of "begging" whenever I did communicate with the boss. I indirectly discovered a lot of information which directly affected my project. The boss knew about the info but never passed it along. I began to feel I was always "hat in hand" when seeking guidance and direction. When I asked to be included it didn't happen and I remained in the vacuum of a communication blackout. My own morale plummeted and interest waned.

All of us have heard it said over and over so it must be true: Good Communication goes hand-in-hand with success. Hard experience over the years has reinforced why communication can be a key to either effectiveness or destructiveness within the organization. Our instructors and Chiefs and Sergeants were absolutely correct in their exhortations to "get out and about" every single day.

*Editor's note: With the New Year just around the corner, now's a perfect time for all of us to resolve to communicate more frequently and more effectively. Carl, thank you for the reminder!*