

# **A Leadership Crisis: The U.S. Navy's Need for Vertical Development**



12 May 2021

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the United States Naval War College, Newport, RI.

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<b>REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE</b>				<i>Form Approved</i> OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. <b>PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.</b>					
<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 12-05-2021		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> FINAL		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> N/A	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b>  <b>A Leadership Crisis: The U.S. Navy's Need for Vertical Development</b>				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b>  Mark A. Nicholson, CAPT, USN				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  Writing & Teaching Excellence Center Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  N/A				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b> N/A	
				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b> N/A	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> A paper submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the curriculum. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> Given the heightening complexity of the world and the challenge of transforming officers' mental capacities, the Navy must make the most of every opportunity to "gain and sustain an intellectual overmatch" with its adversaries. This conjuncture requires a leader development strategy that can mentally prepare naval officers for a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world. One area of study yielding profound insight into cognitive growth over the past four decades is vertical development. While most conventional leadership programs emphasize information, skills, or competencies – known as horizontal development – these approaches do not equip leaders for situations beyond their current worldview – ones that are ambiguous and complex. In contrast, vertical development expands one's aptitude to grasp, identify, and react to a span of viewpoints, sentiments, and ways of thinking – magnifying cognitive capacity by moving an individual up the "orders of consciousness" staircase. The Navy's current approach to leader development is deficient, and it must integrate vertical elements in its programs for three reasons. First, the Navy's present strategy for leader development is heavily immersed in horizontal elements, limiting the number of officers who can lead in complex environments. Second, the few existing opportunities for vertical development are initiated too late in an officer's career, minimizing the amount of time for nurturing mental complexity. Finally, the Navy's persisting progression model does not make full use of its biggest asset – the diverse perspectives of its service members, which are critical to expanding mental complexity. Thus, the current model hampers the Navy's ability to address the leadership crisis and prepare its wardroom for a VUCA world. Unfortunately, time is not on the Navy's side, so it must make every minute count by incorporating these practices at every level of Navy leadership.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS (Key words)</b> Leadership, Vertical Development, Navy, Officers					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>  N/A	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>  10	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b> Director, Writing Center
<b>a. REPORT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> UNCLASSIFIED			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)</b> 401-841-6499

## Introduction

The Navy is in a leadership crisis. According to the National Defense Strategy, America is “facing increased global disorder, characterized by [a] decline in the long-standing rules-based international order—creating a security environment more complex and volatile than any...in recent memory.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the Future of Defense Task Force declared the military must produce leaders with expanded capabilities and novel ways of reasoning to face these evolving threats.<sup>2</sup> However, the Joint Chiefs of Staff stated that these cognitive abilities are grown not through “episodic educational opportunities” but over an officer’s career.<sup>3</sup> Given the heightening complexity of the world and the challenge of transforming officers’ mental capacities, the Navy must make the most of every opportunity to “gain and sustain an intellectual overmatch” with its adversaries.<sup>4</sup> This conjuncture requires a leader development strategy that can mentally prepare naval officers for a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world.

One area of study yielding profound insight into cognitive growth over the past four decades is *vertical development*. While most conventional leadership programs emphasize information, skills, or competencies – known as *horizontal development* – these approaches do not equip leaders for situations beyond their current worldview – ones that are ambiguous and complex.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, vertical development expands one’s aptitude to grasp, identify, and react to a span of viewpoints, sentiments, and ways of thinking – magnifying cognitive capacity by moving an individual up the “orders of consciousness” staircase.<sup>6</sup> This point is not to say that horizontal development is insignificant. On the contrary, both forms are necessary, and they should complement each other throughout a leader’s career.

The Navy's current approach to leader development is deficient, and it must integrate vertical elements in its programs for three reasons. First, the Navy's present strategy for leader development is heavily immersed in horizontal elements, limiting the number of officers who can lead in complex environments. Second, the few existing opportunities for vertical development are initiated too late in an officer's career, minimizing the amount of time for nurturing mental complexity. Finally, the Navy's persisting progression model does not make full use of its biggest asset – the diverse perspectives of its service members, which are critical to expanding mental complexity.

### **Too Horizontally Focused**

The Cold War and its associated thrust for military technology pushed leader development toward technical knowledge and the attainment of skills. Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, the father of the nuclear Navy, thought the Soviets led America in technical knowhow after the launch of Sputnik and contended the U.S. Navy must accentuate “technical education and training at the expense of liberal arts.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately this underscored a desire for technical degrees and yielded career tracks subordinated to community-specific assignments.<sup>8</sup> This mindset has driven the Navy's master plan for leader development – if officers are heading to job X, then they need skill Y. Accordingly, everyone in a set career pipeline has the same technical knowledge and skills.

The Navy's standing model for officer development is heavily focused on horizontal growth and sets leaders up for failure. Skills and knowledge are the ingredients for horizontal evolution.<sup>9</sup> While the Navy Leader Development Framework recognizes that the progression for junior leaders “is biased toward individual competence,” continuing the expertise-based

approach through the senior ranks with warfare community training and the courses at NLEC sets leaders up for failure in two ways.<sup>10</sup> First, it emphasizes that knowledge and skills are the sole means for success, and second, it injects officers into the fleet without understanding adult development theory. Young leaders need to appreciate that, contrary to previous scientific thought, their minds may continue to develop throughout their professional lives depending on the practices they adopt. Consequently, officers accumulate skills and knowledge without the mental complexity to utilize them in a VUCA world.<sup>11</sup>

The Navy must emphasize the expansion of mental capacity to use available skills and knowledge. While instructors continue to pass along valuable content, a student's ability to use it effectively may be limited, negating the training. For example, if a leader's mind equates to a water glass, the glass will eventually overflow if water is continually poured into it – the water represents knowledge and skills.<sup>12</sup> However, if the Navy adds vertical elements to its training programs, the leader's mind – the water glass – can expand to accommodate and then make use of the water poured into it.<sup>13</sup> Thus, programs that continually teach knowledge and skills will eventually become ineffective unless there is a parallel process to stretch the student's mind at the same time.

Although education provides the prospect of expanding mental complexity, the Navy is still struggling to put words into action. While recognizing that an educated officer corps is vital to the Navy's success in a VUCA world, an analysis completed in 2008 found that only 20 percent of the flag officers had attended a service war college.<sup>14</sup> Educational opportunities like the U.S. Naval War College (NWC) are critical to meaning-making because students process original or conflicting information and integrate that data into their mental models – a crucial part of vertical development.<sup>15</sup> But each warfare community logically promotes its top players,

and the pervasive “platform-centrism” means that officers attending service schools or serving in versatile joint or interagency commands are at a significant disadvantage.<sup>16</sup> So, the Navy has its work cut out to build the needed cadre of educated leaders.

While vertical development is crucial to leading in a VUCA future, the Navy’s sole emphasis on skills and knowledge – horizontal development – hinders efforts to prepare its leaders. Studies have shown that people who advance through Robert Kegan’s “orders of consciousness” have a “greater ability for learning, complex problem-solving and the ability to set [a] new direction and lead change.”<sup>17</sup> Until the Navy incorporates vertical elements in most of its training and education efforts, it will continue to fall short on the number of leaders ready for the imminent challenges, leaving them perplexed in a VUCA world.

### **Maximizing Time for Growth**

Expanding one’s mental complexity and progressing to higher levels of consciousness requires time. Researchers in adult development found that individuals’ minds burgeon as they evolve through the expected levels of mental complexity at different speeds and make sense of their environment in an increasingly elaborate and broad manner with each respective stage.<sup>18</sup> This progression does not evolve at a constant rate because there are phases of growth and periods where people plateau (see Figure below).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, those stages where plateaus occur are for significant periods of time.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the ability to progress fully up the developmental stairs has a substantial temporal component.

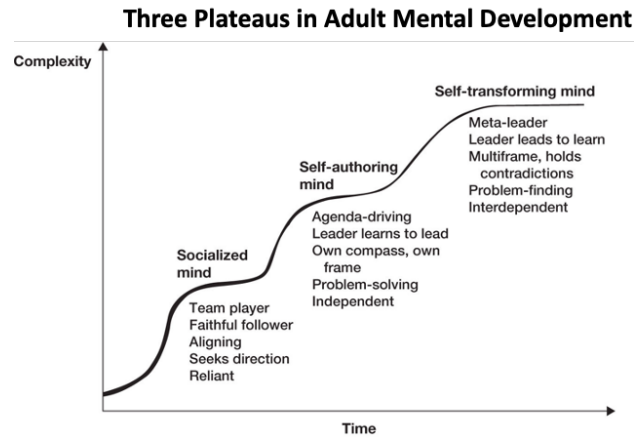


Figure – Source: Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*<sup>21</sup>

Prospects for exposure to vertical development in the Navy are either fortuitous or start too late in an officer’s career. Unfortunately, the only officers exposed to adult developmental theories and methods for growth are those selected for in-residence JPME at the NWC. Typically, this does not occur until the O4 level, making the possibility to learn and engage in vertical development an opportunity of chance. In addition, the Navy’s Intermediate Flag and Executive (IFLEX) and Advanced Flag and Executive (AFLEX) programs at the NWC do not introduce the concepts until the two-star or three-star level. Both programs deny officers nearly a decade or more of service to grow their mental complexity through vertical practices. Hence, the Navy is losing valuable time to build the leaders it needs for the future.

Introducing vertical elements earlier in the career path maximizes the amount of time for enhancing mental complexity. The Navy’s current structure for leadership development treats growth as intermittent events versus a long-term process. Given the substantial time involved in transmuting leaders’ mental complexity, it logically follows that officers in the Navy should deliberately begin to practice the methods for vertical growth early in their careers.

Incorporating adult development theories and practices into officer accessions training and

reinforcing them during other leader development programs would create an awareness of the concepts and provide “the ongoing follow-up to solidify new thinking and behaviors into new habits.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the Navy must incorporate vertical elements into initial training phases, so officers are exposed earlier in their careers, maximizing the time for cognitive growth.

The Navy’s Leader Development Framework states that “effective Navy leaders... must demonstrate a deliberate commitment to grow personally and professionally throughout [their] careers.”<sup>23</sup> There is no guarantee that an adult will progress through the successive orders of consciousness – it takes time. However, if the Navy incorporates vertical elements into its programs, leaders will be introduced to the theories early in their career, giving them the best chance for growth and progress. Accordingly, this approach will expand the number of leaders aspiring to develop their mental complexity and prepare them to lead in a VUCA environment. Given the proper time for development, the Navy must also meld another essential component for vertical development – a multitude of viewpoints to facilitate colliding perspectives.

### **Diversity of Perspectives**

Diverse organizations accomplish more than non-diverse organizations. Studies show that a diverse group is “58 percent more likely” than a non-diverse group to evaluate a set of circumstances correctly.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the probability of diverse and gender-diverse teams performing better than other teams is 35 percent and 15 percent, respectively.<sup>25</sup> The myriad of contrasting views afforded by diversity is critical to expanding perspectives and solving the Navy’s complex challenges. Thus, diversity is imperative to the Navy’s future.

If leadership development programs do not make diversity a priority, they limit the evolution of their leaders. One of America’s asymmetric advantages over its adversaries is the

mélange of ethnic and social groups that compose its population. These various views offer the right set of circumstances to meld different perspectives with complex problems and should be considered and treated “as a precious resource.”<sup>26</sup> However, it is only an advantage if the Navy capitalizes on it. If an organization fails to bring its affiliates into contact with other viewpoints, its membership falls back on status-quo thinking and reaches similar conclusions of the past, depriving members of cognitive development afforded by colliding perspectives.<sup>27</sup> Thus, to grow leaders with the mental complexity required for a VUCA environment, the U.S. Navy must maximize and draw on a diverse force.

The Navy’s disparate diversity numbers hamper the intellectual potential of its leaders and their teams. While the enlisted ranks in the U.S. Navy are representative of America’s population, the officer corps is not. Naval officers are profusely white and male and are not illustrative of today’s American society.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the numbers of minorities serving in warfare communities are disproportionately low. For example, according to the 2018 census, Blacks or African Americans account for 13 percent of the United States today.<sup>29</sup> However, only 2.2 percent of aviation officers and 2 percent of submarine officers are Black, while Blacks as a group comprise just 7.3 percent of the entire officer corps. In addition, women account for 51 percent of society, but only 20 percent of naval officers.<sup>30</sup> These facts not only highlight systemic issues of race and gender misrepresentation in the Navy’s officer corps, but also accentuate a critical shortage of viewpoints urgently needed for leader development.

Moreover, studies show that organizations with increased gender and ethnic diversity are more innovative and imaginative. A recent survey of more than 7,600 companies found that “culturally diverse leadership teams were more likely to develop new products than those with homogeneous leadership.”<sup>31</sup> The increased levels of diversity boost an organization’s cognitive

capacity by forcing team members to rein in biases and interrogate their beliefs, avoiding hazards of conventionality that deter novel reasoning.<sup>32</sup> This process is the heart of vertical development. Consequently, the paucity of views in the service hinders the transformation of leaders' mental models and aptitude.

Lack of cross-pollination in the officer corps further constrains vertical development. Retired Admiral James Stavridis noted in a co-authored article that the unrestricted-line community is already task-saturated due to the need to “master platform operational skills” and foster technical expertise.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, present career patterns confine the Navy's ability to supplement experiences with joint or interagency tours.<sup>34</sup> These limitations oblige the Navy to detail officers of different backgrounds to wardrooms in the fleet. However, technical career paths and training for community-specific jobs have curtailed the blending of experiences and ideas from the pre-Cold War era “where submariners served aboard surface vessels, surface-warfare officers served as the chiefs of staff for aviators, and vice versa.”<sup>35</sup> This constraint stymies another avenue for vertical development by depriving the Navy's wardroom of the assorted perspectives from different warfare specialties.

Multiple points of view are critical to cultivating an officer corps that can lead in a VUCA world. Research shows that diverse groups make winning teams. The Navy must nurture an environment that challenges assumptions and belief systems – a key enabler to enlarging mental complexity. However, it must take proactive steps to create a more diverse wardroom by commissioning more women and officers of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, it must adjust career paths to permit cross-pollination from warfare communities. Through these measures, the Navy can add more vertical elements to its leadership development continuum.

## Conclusion

Achieving intellectual overmatch with potential adversaries requires the U.S. Navy to modify its existing leadership development continuum. While the institution produces technical experts, it is deficient in preparing naval officers to deal with complex problems. First, it overemphasizes skills and knowledge without broadening the officer corps' cognitive capacity to use those abilities. Second, it introduces the scant number of instances for vertical development too late in officers' careers, restricting the time to expand their mental complexity. Finally, it fails to fully capitalize on the diverse backgrounds and experiences available to the service. Thus, the current model hampers the Navy's ability to address the leadership crisis and prepare its wardroom for a VUCA world. The Navy's leadership must heed the intellectual gap in the officer corps and take the necessary steps to close it. Unfortunately, time is not on the Navy's side, so it must make every minute count by incorporating these practices at every level of Navy leadership.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> James Mattis, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), 1, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Seth Moulton and Jim Banks, et al., *Future of Defense Task Force Report 2020*, US Congress, House Armed Service Committee, September 23, 2020, 17, <https://armedservices.house.gov/2020/9/future-of-defense-task-force-releases-final-report>.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War," May 01, 2020, 3, <https://www.jcs.mil/Doctrine>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Rybek, "The Case for Maturity," Vertical Development Series, Library of Professional Coaching, March 22, 2016, 4, <https://libraryofprofessionalcoaching.com/applicationsuses/leadership-coaching/the-case-for-maturity/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. For "orders of consciousness," see Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> William M. Beasley, "The Rise, Fall, and Early Reawakening of US Naval Professionalism," in *Redefining the Modern Military*, eds. Nathan K. Finney and Tyrell O. Mayfield (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 117.

<sup>8</sup> James Stavridis and Mark Hagerott, "The Heart of an Officer: Joint, Interagency, and International Operations and Navy Career Development," *Naval War College Review* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 30.

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- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 9.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>14</sup> Department of the Navy, *Task Force One Navy Final: Our Navy Team – Navigating A Course to True North*, (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, 2020), 31, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/26/2002570959/-1/-1/1/TASK%20FORCE%20ONE%20NAVY%20FINAL%20REPORT.PDF>; Beasley, “The Rise, Fall, and Early Reawakening,” 120.
- <sup>15</sup> Edward D. Hess, *Learn or Die: Using Science to Build a Leading-Edge Learning Organization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 14.
- <sup>16</sup> Stavridis et al., “Heart of an Officer,” 40.
- <sup>17</sup> Nick Petrie, “Future Trends in Leadership Development,” *Center for Creative Leadership white paper* 5, no. 5, (2011), 13, <http://law.scu.edu/wp-content/uploads/leadership/Future-Trends-in-Leadership-Development.pdf>.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 12.
- <sup>19</sup> Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2009), 15.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 16.
- <sup>22</sup> Petrie, “Vertical Leadership Development–Part 1,” 4.
- <sup>23</sup> Department of the Navy, *Navy Leader Development*, 2.
- <sup>24</sup> Department of the Navy, *Task Force One*, 6.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>26</sup> Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 211.
- <sup>27</sup> Nick Petrie, “The How-To of Vertical Leadership Development-Part 2: 30 Experts, 3 Conditions, and 15 Approaches,” *Center for Creative Leadership white paper* (2015), 4, <https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/verticalLeadersPart2.pdf>.
- <sup>28</sup> Department of the Navy, *Task Force One*, 6.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 15-16.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>31</sup> David Rock and Heidi Grant, “Why Diverse Teams Are Smarter,” *Harvard Business Review*, November 4, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/11/why-diverse-teams-are-smarter>.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>33</sup> Stavridis et al., “Heart of an Officer,” 27.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>35</sup> Beasley, “The Rise, Fall, and Early Reawakening,” 117-118.