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**ALL ABOARD! BENCHMARKING HUMAN  
RESOURCES ONBOARDING PRACTICES – PART II**

by

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March 2021

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**ALL ABOARD! BENCHMARKING HUMAN RESOURCES ONBOARDING  
PRACTICES – PART II**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research builds on the work of Helene Caniac’s Naval Postgraduate School thesis “All Aboard! Benchmarking Human Resources Onboarding Practices,” by assessing current Department of the Navy (DON) onboarding practices of Navy civilian executives and providing recommended human resource solutions to support the onboarding of those executives. This research analyzes the onboarding of leaders within organizations through interviews of subject-matter experts and the application of an onboarding model, which was developed using data in Part I of the research. Practices in the onboarding model can assist the Navy in improving leadership development, which has been neglected according to Office of Personnel Management studies. This thesis argues the “Executive Onboarding Activities” model provides a focus toward improving and standardizing Navy civilian executive leadership development with transformative organizational goals and relational onboarding activities. The analysis of interview data reveals that several gaps exist in the onboarding activities of Navy civilian executives. These and other gaps are supported by examining current DON and Department of Defense executive development programs against the onboarding model. Overall, this study finds that in addition to connecting executive onboarding to leadership development, addressing several gaps will support the assimilation and development of Navy executives.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

CEE	Center for Executive Education
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
DOD	Department of Defense
DON	Department of the Navy
ECQ	executive core qualifications
EMPO	Executive Management Program Office
HR	human resources
NPS	Naval Postgraduate School
OCHR	Office of Civilian Human Resources
SES	Senior Executive Service
SHRM	Society for Human Resource Management

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In December of 2018, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral John Richardson, released version 2.0 of his “Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority.” In it, he articulated a need to improve Navy onboarding practices and identified the end state of improvements as “A dominant naval force that produces outstanding leaders and teams...that learn and adapt faster than our rivals” (Department of the Navy [DON], 2018, p. 16). To achieve this, he prioritized tasks within four lines of effort (LOE). The gold LOE, which was to “Strengthen Our Navy Team for the Future” (DON, 2018), prioritized the need to strengthen onboarding practices through three tasks:

1. Using a standards-based assessment that evaluates character and that values merit over tenure. Focus on enhancing coaching and individual development.
2. Developing Navy-wide guidance for Navy civilian acculturation that provides a consistent approach to acclimating civilians to our Navy mission and culture.
3. Creating a structure for effectively developing civilian leaders through experience, education, training, and personal development (pp. 12, 13).

This research explored the relationship between onboarding practices and leadership development in support of the Navy’s efforts to improve the acculturation of civilian executives. The results of this research will inform executives and Human Resources (HR) practitioners and guide their establishment of procedures when changes in organizational objectives occur.

This research defined leadership and explored how an organization’s onboarding program influences the development of executives. For the purposes of this study, leadership is defined as the knowledge, skill, and ability to manage a team of individuals towards accomplishing organizational objectives. In other words, advancing a leader’s development positively influences organizational success. Leaders and followers can learn practices that support skill development as explained by a dominant theory known as transformational leadership, in which both employee and leader strive to challenge and improve each other.

This study draws data the author collected in conjunction with Helene Caniac, who used the data to produce a thesis titled *All Aboard! Benchmarking Human Resources Onboarding Practices* (Caniac, 2018). In support of her research, she and I interviewed HR professionals to evaluate what onboarding practices are used in industry and which of those practices supported good leadership. For this study, I conducted additional interviews with Navy professionals (i.e., Navy civilian executives, Office of Civilian Human Resources (OCHR) staff, and command staff) in collaboration with Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) researchers and drew on both data sets to assess the agency’s onboarding practices against the factors identified in Caniac’s research.

After evaluating industry onboarding practices and assessing the Navy’s own onboarding program, researchers developed the “Navy Onboarding Activities Assessment” model. The model evaluates leadership development programs that target Navy civilian executives, assessing the degree to which each onboarding activity is offered in all of the various programs available internally to the DON and Department of Defense (DOD).

To evaluate an organization’s onboarding program, it is important to link its various activities to the organization’s goals. This research extended findings of Caniac’s thesis (2018) and the Executive Onboarding Activities model (Aten, Salem, Caniac, and Williamson, 2019, p. 10) to develop the Navy Onboarding Activities Assessment model. Caniac’s (2018) research identified onboarding objectives as an influencer of onboarding outcomes. This thesis classified onboarding activities as either higher-level or lower-level. These activities are at the intersection of the resulting Navy Onboarding Activities Assessment model’s two major variables, organizational goals and onboarding objectives.

The analysis presented in this thesis suggests that the “Executive Onboarding Activities” model could improve and standardize Navy civilian executive leadership development with transformative organizational goals and relational onboarding objectives. This research highlights several gaps, such as the lack of internal advocates and insufficient connection between onboarding activities and leadership development and suggests remedies. The connection between onboarding activities and leadership development is an underlying argument in this research, so is where this study begins.

## **II. BACKGROUND/LITERATURE REVIEW**

To achieve the CNO's goal of "outstanding leaders," it is important to first define leadership. Although there are conflicting theories on what makes a good leader, the basis for defining leadership is often dependent upon achieving organizational objectives. There are many theories on leadership, with arguments claiming either that leadership is something one is born with or a skill that can be learned. The Great Man theory described how "people looked to historical leaders of the past and noticed that they were mostly strong, brave, and bold men who rose to the occasion when it presented itself" (Bolden, 2004, p. 9). These were often thought to be individuals born with the traits necessary to be a leader. Alternatively, the theory relating to transformational leadership "supports a mutually beneficial relationship between leader and follower, where they strive to challenge and improve each other" (Burns, 1978). This theory argues that one can learn and exercise certain practices to improve leadership skills. As discussed in Chapter I, for the purposes of this research, leadership is defined as the knowledge, skill, and ability to manage a team of individuals towards accomplishing organizational objectives. Regardless of the approach, most theories of leadership are founded on the goal to obtain organizational objectives (Caniac, 2018, p. 11). After defining leadership the chapter then defines onboarding terms used in this study's model. This will further support the connection between onboarding practices and leadership development.

### **A. ONBOARDING PRACTICES SHOULD SUPPORT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

Since organizational objectives are key to leadership development, onboarding practices should reflect how a leader achieves their organizational objectives. "A leader can affect organizational performance on three levels: individual, group, and organizational" (James and Collins, 2008, pp. 1–12). Leadership development primarily begins with the leader at the individual level, with the effects revealing themselves "through increased technical competence, productivity, communication skills and strategic thinking" (Caniac, 2018, p. 14). The next effect of leadership development would be at the team level. The measurable outcomes at this level are related to team functioning and

include “decreased absenteeism and staff turnover, increased willingness to work overtime, and enhanced participation, accountability and suggestions/feedback” (Bolden, 2004, p. 20). Finally, the effects of leadership development at the organizational level focus on how well the organization meets its objectives and “include increased profit and share values, customer satisfaction and better relationships within the industry” (Caniac, 2018, p. 14). Because these three outcomes are the ultimate measure of success for executive performance, they should be included in an organization’s onboarding practices.

Onboarding practices should also support individualized solutions for leader development and assimilation into the organization. With each leader having their own experiences and background, the need is for organizations to develop the necessary skills that adapt the executive to the organization’s culture. Caniac (2018) “suggests that onboarding practices (among other policies) take a long-term and multi-faceted approach to leader development” (p. 15). A tailored approach to leadership development is particularly relevant as organizations quickly adapt to changes in today’s fast-paced and competitive environment. “This complexity calls for a broad yet individualized approach to leadership” (Liden, 2013).

Acculturation through a tailored onboarding experience also allows executives to more readily assimilate into the organization and empowers them to set the tone. This allows executives to embody organizational objectives reinforcing efforts in aligning all personnel to the culture. Bradt and Tavis (2010) describe the importance of organizational goals in terms of transformational leadership, encouraging leaders to get employee buy-in, allowing for organizational alignment and a shared culture that is often seen in successful organizations (pp. 4–5). Google is an example of this type of leadership when they allow employees to send emails directly to executives, and host weekly meetings called TGIF where employees ask questions directly to executives about issues related to the company” (He, 2013).

Organizations that establish successful onboarding programs can create what Caniac (2018) identifies as a virtuous cycle, “successful practices [that] help develop leaders and ensure they have the support required throughout their tenure to accomplish the mission” (p. 15). These onboarding practices empower executives to establish

appropriate policies that support the shifting of organizational objectives. Leaders therefore “have the power to influence their HR organization and directly impact onboarding effectiveness by initiating and supporting onboarding that supports transformational leadership” (Caniac, 2018, p. 15). Prioritization of onboarding practices that are part of a leader’s development will support an organization’s ability to facilitate advances in its onboarding program.

## **B. ONBOARDING TERMINOLOGY DEFINED**

Effective onboarding practices should integrate and be part of an overall leadership development program (Aten et al., 2019, p. 22). To assist in the development of robust onboarding programs, NPS researchers developed the model in Figure 1 to explain the relationship between onboarding activities, an organization’s development goals, and HR’s objectives. The onboarding *objectives*, presented on the horizontal axis, include five categories that range from functional to relational: employee onboarding, basic information, action planning, stakeholder engagement, and executive support. Those objectives create an intersection with the organizational *goals* (vertical axis) and are arranged from administrative goals to transformational goals. The organizational goals are defined as compliance, skill development, personal growth, strategic planning, cultural assimilation, and relationship building. The intersection of these goals and objectives have been further categorized into specific onboarding *activities*. Onboarding activities are the processes for new employees to learn the knowledge, skills, and behaviors they need to become an organizational insider, and which provide them the means to be successful (Bauer and Erdogan, 2015, p. 56). The following section defines terms to establish a common understanding of the phrases used in the model. These definitions are important in recognizing standardized organizational goals and onboarding objectives.

The figure is a 6x5 matrix titled 'Executive Onboarding Activities Model'. The vertical axis is labeled 'Organizational Goals' and ranges from 'Administrative' at the bottom to 'Transformational' at the top. The horizontal axis is labeled 'Onboarding Objectives' and ranges from 'Functional' on the left to 'Relational' on the right. The matrix contains the following activities:

Organizational Goal	EMPLOYEE ORIENTATION	BASIC INFORMATION	ACTION PLANNING	STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT	EXECUTIVE SUPPORT
RELATIONSHIP	Schedule ongoing meetings	Understand roles and responsibilities	Plan strategic communication	Get early feedback from executive team	Establish an internal advocate
CULTURE	Understand social norms	Embrace ethics and values	Plan for change management	Participate in cross-functional teams	Participate in peer support groups
STRATEGY	Set performance measures	Understand the mission	Develop a strategic plan	Conduct stakeholder analysis	Connect with senior leaders
PERSONAL GROWTH	Establish personal goals	Identify development opportunities	Create career road map	Explore personal interaction style	Receive external coaching
SKILL DEVELOPMENT	Learn administrative procedures	Learn about operations	Acquire program management skills	Participate in experience tours	Take leadership classes
COMPLIANCE	Set up logistics (Security, IT, parking)	Review procedures & policies	Schedule required trainings	Meet with direct reports	Meet with Supervisor

Figure 1. Executive Onboarding Activities Model. Source: Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

### 1. Onboarding Objectives: Functional to Relational

The onboarding objectives are HR outcomes that are categorized on a continuum to clearly show a progression from objectives established for specific and concrete tasks (functional) to those focused on a connection with people or things (relational). Some of the onboarding activities associated with these objectives are more obvious, such as establishing security and network permissions, reviewing procedures and policies, and learning administrative processes. This study’s researchers have identified these as more functional onboarding activities. Other activities are classified as being more relational, such as meeting with direct reports and/or supervisors, conducting a stakeholder analysis, and connecting with senior leaders. Defining all of the onboarding objectives—employee onboarding, basic information, action planning, stakeholder engagement, and executive support—better illustrates how they range between activities focused on basic employee functioning and activities supporting executive leadership.

An **employee orientation** is typically one of the first events new employees experience as they transition into an organization. Some organizations have an orientation program that lasts several weeks or even months. However, research published in the *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* found that “54 percent of the newcomer orientation programs occurred within the first 4 weeks of the job” (Anderson, Cunningham-Snell, and Haigh, 1996, pp. 169–183). The survey covers these three areas “in most orientation programs: (a) health and safety issues, (b) terms and conditions of employment, and (c) the organization itself (e.g., history, a tour, and an introduction to co-workers)” (Anderson et al., 1996, pp. 169–183). Methods to administer this information typically utilize “teaching,” and constitute a one-way dialogue. Orientation objectives include: setting up logistics, learning administrative procedures, establishing personal goals, setting performance measures, understanding social norms, and scheduling ongoing meetings.

**Basic information** is often thought of as the knowledge passed through manuals, transcriptions or textbooks. This information can be disseminated through policies and procedures; operation manuals; standard organizational development opportunities; the organization’s mission, vision and values; or the position’s roles and responsibilities.

**Action planning** is the onboarding objective where a leader pursues direct actions to further their goals. At the higher level, action planning focuses on strategic thinking and metric-driven decisions. “Thinking strategically includes being able to diagnose the organization and maintain a broad perspective as well as developing personal action plans” (Aten et al., 2019, p. 17). These plans should be broad to include personal, organizational, and strategic objectives (Aten et al., 2019, p. 18) and focus on specific metrics for performance. Action plans are often seen in the form of a 100-day plan, where leaders can implement early wins, demonstrate their commitment to a strategy, be focused on helping the organization grow and make necessary changes (Aten et al., 2019, p. 20). Action plans can include: scheduling required training, acquiring program management skills, developing a career road map, establishing a strategic plan, executing a risk assessment, developing a plan for change management, and generating a plan for strategic communication. Basic planning activities, such as training schedule and road maps are

common objectives in most organizations, while more strategic planning efforts are often neglected in leader onboarding (Aten et al., 2019, p. 14).

**Stakeholder engagement** is key to developing effective leaders and is often overlooked, resulting in a lack of cultural integration. Leaders that do not participate in stakeholder engagement “fail to be inspired and fail to lead and inspire others” (Weinfurter and Donlon, 2016). Engaging with stakeholders suggests a desire to listen, ability to discuss issues of interest to the stakeholders, and a willingness to participate in organizational change (Jeffery, 2009, p. 3). An engaged leader is willing to modify what they aim to achieve and how they operate as a result of stakeholder interactions (Jeffery, 2009, p. 3). Moving up the scale from compliance, stakeholder engagement runs from basic administrative activities to those activities more important to transformational leadership: engaging in discussions with direct reports, participating in experience tours, exploring a personal interaction style, conducting a stakeholder analysis, participating in cross-functional teams, and getting feedback from an executive team.

**Executive support** is the most relational onboarding objective and requires support from internal and external advocates. This is not to be confused with executive support staff; in large part, it is the exact opposite. Executive support includes a variety of activities related to working with senior leadership: regular meetings and dialogues with the leaders’ immediate supervisor, taking leadership classes, having an HR partner, receiving external coaching, connecting with senior leaders, having an executive sponsor (senior mentor outside direct report), participating in peer support groups, and/or establishing an internal advocate.

As you see, the onboarding activities highlighted range from basic activities that are focused on meeting minimal new employee orientation to those that support deeper connection to people in the organization.

## **2. Organizational Goals: Administrative to Transformational**

The organization’s goals are categorized by impact and are on a continuum that ranges from administrative—or goals used to support the operations of an organization—to more transformational—goals used for changing, or transforming, an organization. The

model's organizational goals include compliance, skill development, personal growth, strategy development, cultural strengthening, and relationship building.

**Compliance**, though foundational, is the most administrative onboarding objective. It “consists of practices built to satisfy fulfilment of the organization's policies and procedures” (Aten et al., 2019, p. 10). Compliance is seen as conformance to applicable statutes, laws, and regulations in areas such as hiring practices, employee discipline, employee transfers and terminations, employee training, pay status, employee compensation and benefits. At the minimum, these activities are focused on function and include basic activities such as setting up logistics (IT, security, permissions, parking, terms and conditions of employment), reviewing procedures and policies, and scheduling training as well as more relational activities such as introductory meetings with direct reports and supervisors.

The second organizational goal in the model is **skill development**, which “is the process of (1) identifying skill gaps, and (2) developing and honing those skills” (Chua, 2016). Developing skills can improve an individual's “ability to execute plans with success” (Chua, 2016). Further, a tailored approach to skill development helps organizations create uniquely suited executives to achieve their missions (Aten et al., 2019, p. 11). At a functional level, learning administrative procedures and operations is a way of developing one's skills as they integrate into the organization. Acquiring program management skills is somewhat more relational because of the need to work in teams. Participating in experience tours or taking leadership classes are onboarding objectives that are even more relational because they help fulfill the organizational goal of group skill development.

**Personal growth**, as the third organizational goal, “refers to various techniques for improving one's habits, behavior, actions and reactions” (Sasson, 2019). The “personal growth of leaders helps organizations develop leader attitudes and qualities” that lead to success (Aten et al., 2019, p. 11). Although personal growth helps to achieve more transformational organizational goals, it is still somewhat more administrative in nature. Personal growth within functional onboarding objectives include: establishing personal goals, identifying development opportunities, and creating a career road map. However,

more relational objectives that support personal growth include: exploring personal interaction styles and receiving external coaching.

**Strategy**, the fourth goal, is often used to encourage the leader to think about the big picture and long-term outcomes for the organization. As Dr. Michael D. Watkins (2007) observed,

Strategy is a set of guiding principles that, when communicated and adopted in the organization, generates a desired pattern of decision making. A strategy is therefore about how people throughout the organization should make decisions and allocate resources in order to accomplish key objectives. A good strategy provides a clear roadmap, consisting of a set of guiding principles or rules, that defines the actions people in the business should take (and not take) and the things they should prioritize (and not prioritize) to achieve desired goals.

Strategy is what drives organizational success and is a key function of the leadership role. “Enacting a strategy requires that the individual leader be both adaptive and authentic” (Aten et al., 2019, p. 18). “An adaptive leader must be able to...[conduct] ongoing and systematic assessments of the organization and its stakeholders” (Orr, 2015, p. 18). An authentic leader is transformational—which helps when “manag [ing] first impressions” and “build [ing] high-performing teams”—and is able to “[communicate] expectations, builds trust, and connects with direct reports and team leaders” (Kambil, 2016). In a functional context, setting performance measures and understanding the organization’s mission are foundational strategic activities that are part of the onboarding process. Moving towards the goal’s more relational activities the model identifies the development of a strategic plan, conducting a stakeholder analysis and connecting with senior leaders and other key stakeholders.

The next organizational goal for leaders is **culture**, which “is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization” (Science Museum of Minnesota, n.d.). It is what uniquely identifies a group from being different from others. Culture awareness, the most basic cultural activity, “can help new leaders...assimilate into an organization’s culture” (Aten et al., 2019, p. 11). A leader’s lack of cultural awareness is quite often the cause of failing to integrate into an organization. From a functional objective, successful

cultural integration would ensure leaders understand the cultural norms and embrace the organization's ethics and values. Culture as a relational objective includes other activities that help leaders impact the culture and includes activities such as planning for change management and participating in cross-functional teams and peer support groups.

Finally, **relationship building** supports the development of “strong connections, which are a core attribute of successful leadership under the ‘transformational leader’ model” (Aten et al., 2019, p. 11). Relationship building, in the context of organizational goals, is quite often left out of onboarding activities. At the most basic level, scheduling ongoing meetings and understanding roles and responsibilities are examples of more functional organizational goals, though they do support relationship building. Alternatively, “a more relational approach calls for leaders to identify and connect with key stakeholders,” actively assist in building mutually beneficial relationships, and support “authentic” communication with internal and external stakeholders (Aten et al., 2019, p. 6). At the opening of the College of Leadership and Ethics at the Naval War College (NWC), the CNO recently called for an even stronger focus on the relational objectives, calling for more than leader mentorship, asking that “organizations establish internal advocates” as part of the onboarding process (Chief of Naval Operations [CNO], 2018, 27:41-29:13).

As you can see, the onboarding activities highlighted above range from basic activities that are focused on meeting minimal organizational requirements (compliance and personal growth) to those that the transformational leader needs to support deep dives into the organizational culture and interpersonal relationships.

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### **III. METHOD**

The purpose of this research is to assess current DON onboarding practices of Navy civilian executives and to provide knowledge of innovative human resource solutions to support the onboarding of those executives. The analysis includes Navy policy documents and interviews from Navy professionals. The author conducted this thesis research in three phases, the first phase in collaboration with others, and the subsequent second and third, independently.

The first phase of the study was achieved in collaboration with research that resulted in Caniac's thesis titled *All Aboard! Benchmarking Human Resources Onboarding Practices* (Caniac, 2018). NPS researchers conducted interviews with HR professionals in industry regarding onboarding practices. This research resulted in data that was used to help form the onboarding model.

The author of this thesis conducted additional interviews with Navy personnel, which supported the analysis of gaps in Navy onboarding programs. In the second phase the author identified leadership development programs that targeted Navy civilian executives. These programs were then analyzed against the model to determine their effectiveness at achieving the various onboarding activities. The third phase resulted in the development of an analytical model based on the onboarding model that assessed leadership development programs in the Navy and DOD. This model, paired with the interviews, supported the gaps identified in the conclusion.

#### **A. INDUSTRY AND NAVY INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS**

The purpose of interviews in this study was to evaluate executive onboarding programs within industry and the Navy. Conducted in support of Caniac's study, the author administered short, open-ended interviews with HR professionals at the 2018 Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) Annual Conference. The interview questions focused on the type of onboarding practices used within that HR professional's industry and organization, and the process used to select and develop those practices. The research questions include:

- What onboarding practices and information for leadership does industry use?
  - What onboarding practices are available/innovative?
- What onboarding practices and information does your organization use?
  - How does your organization measure onboarding results?
- Describe the process your organization used to select/develop your onboarding practices?
  - What barriers were there to implementing those processes?
  - What enablers are there to onboarding?
  - What were the desired outcomes of onboarding? (Caniac, 2018, p. 26-27)

There was a total of 45 person-on-the-street type interviews. The five-to-ten-minute opt-in interviews allowed NPS researchers to uncover how HR professionals view onboarding. At the conclusion of the interviews, the researchers compiled notes and analyzed the feedback received. Analysis of the interviews can be found in Caniac's research, which, in part, was used in the development of the onboarding model in Figure 1. Research included in the background chapter defined the terminology within the model to establish a baseline understanding of organizational goals and onboarding objectives.

After the model was established, nine additional interviews were conducted with Navy civilian executives, OCHR staff, and command staff. These purposeful interviews were conducted in a similar format to those done with industry. Interviewees included Senior Executive Service (SES) personnel who recently went through the onboarding process, OCHR staff responsible for executing the Executive Management Program Office (EMPO) program involved with onboarding executives, command HR personnel in support of executive onboarding, and NPS faculty who work with senior leaders through the Center for Executive Education (CEE). NPS researchers scheduled appointments with the various Navy professionals interviewed, which included phone and in-person meetings. Follow up emails and calls were sometimes administered allowing the researchers to dive deeper based on the needs of the study. The purpose of the second set of interviews was to assist in the analysis of the Navy's civilian executive onboarding program. The interview feedback was later used to support the establishment and highlight gaps with the Navy's current civilian executive onboarding practices.

## B. RESEARCH ANALYSIS APPROACH

In the second phase, this study purposely identified leadership development programs within DON and DOD, which targeted Navy civilian executives, specifically those in the SES. These programs were then analyzed against the model in Figure 1 and ranked based on the number and type of onboarding activities offered. A sample of the onboarding activities are in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of Onboarding Activities

Themes		
HR Goals	Functional	Relational
<b>Compliance:</b> is the most administrative form of onboarding and consists of practices built to satisfy fulfilment of the organization’s policies and procedures (Aten et al., 2019, p. 10).	“...an environment for candid and frank discussion of key processes, current issues and initiatives, and best practices and lessons learned” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).	Assisting a “team of 3–5 key organizational members led by an SES” (DON, n.d.-a).
<b>Skill Development:</b> is the process of (1) identifying their skill gaps, and (2) developing and honing those skills (Chua, 2016).	“...designed to provide newly appointed SES with both a practical and theoretical understanding of the structure and processes of the Office of the Secretary of Defense...” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).	“...provocative and creative dialogue among people who can affect an organization’s direction” (LI). “...premier leadership development program for executive leaders...” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).
<b>Personal Growth:</b> refers to various techniques for improving one’s habits, behavior, actions and reactions (Sasson, 2019)	“Feedback reports...paint a comprehensive picture of the specific skills that an individual needs to develop to enhance performance” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).	“An executive coach will work with the executive to determine specific goals and lay out a plan to achieve them” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).
<b>Strategy:</b> is often used to	“...specific action steps and	“...SES members are

Themes		
encourage the leader to think about the big picture and long-term outcomes for the organization.	a framework for ongoing self-reflection and measurement” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).	offered the unique opportunity to form strategic partnerships with top-level executives...” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).
<b>Culture:</b> is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization (Science Museum of Minnesota, n.d.)	“...students earn Joint Professional Military Education credit...” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).	“...small-team exercises, interactive class discussions” (LI). “...allows SES to develop valuable networks...” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).
<b>Relationship:</b> supports the development of strong connections, which are a core attribute of successful leadership under the “transformational leader” model (Aten et al., 2019, p. 11).	“...post-course to ensure continuity of effort as teams continue their work beyond the workshop” (DON, n.d.-b).	“...maximizing your organizational leadership capabilities to gain support and resources for your strategic initiatives” (DON, n.d.-a).
Objectives	Administrative	Transformational
<b>Employee Orientation:</b> is typically one of the first events new employees experience as they transition into an organization.	“...provides a basis for creating an individualized, actionable development plan” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).	“...annual event during which the CNO provides an update to the Navy’s Flag Officers and SES on the current state of affairs of the Navy, the CNO’s leadership vision...Spouses are invited to attend an evening social” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).
<b>Basic Information:</b> is often thought of as the knowledge passed through	“The training assists in preparing, coordinating, authenticating, publishing,	“...designed to ensure the successful transformation of new flag officers and

Themes		
manuals, transcriptions or textbooks.	and distributing the command standard operating procedures...” (Department of Defense, 2017, p. 41).	SES into new roles...” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019)
<b>Action Planning:</b> is the onboarding objective where a leader pursues direct actions to further their goals.	“Attendance...is mandatory for all newly selected...DON SES” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).	“...assists commands in the development and implementation of strategic communication plans and processes” (DON, n.d.-b).
<b>Stakeholder Engagement:</b> is key to developing effective leaders and is often overlooked, resulting in a lack of cultural integration.	Assisting a “team of 3–5 key organizational members led by an SES” (DON, n.d.-a).	Team helps “...shape their specific planning initiatives...” (DON, n.d.-a).
<b>Executive Support:</b> includes a variety of activities related to working with senior leadership	“An executive coach will work with the executive to determine specific goals and lay out a plan to achieve them” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).	“...small-team exercises, interactive class discussions” (LI). “...allows SES to develop valuable networks...” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

An analytical model was created based on the research regarding DON and DOD leadership development programs called the Overall Navy Onboarding Activities model. Each activity has a number associated with it that indicates the total number of DON and DOD programs offering that onboarding activity. This model allows an easy to see snapshot of how well the agencies provide each onboarding activity through all of their various programs.

### **C. ANALYSIS OF OVERALL NAVY ONBOARDING ACTIVITIES MODEL**

The final phase illustrates how onboarding is achieved in the various DON and DOD leadership development programs for SES personnel only. Before providing a description and analysis of each program, an example of each activity in the onboarding model was coded. Afterwards, the programs were ranked based on the number and type of onboarding activities offered. Each activity positively identified in a program was given one point. To give greater weight to the more desired—higher-level—activities, those shaded in the light and dark blue were multiplied times two. The points were added together, which provided ranking for each of the programs, ranging anywhere from 32 to 5. If program scores were tied, the course with the greatest number of points from the higher-level activities was chosen to be presented first. A higher score does not necessarily make a program better, it is simply a measure to indicate how effectively the activities in the programs support the onboarding of executives.

## IV. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Although the Navy follows specific executive onboarding practices, the onboarding process typically lasts one year and technically requires only two tasks. Supporting the need to supplement the onboarding process, the DON and the DOD offer several executive development programs. This chapter evaluates 18 executive development programs using the Executive Onboarding Activities Model, highlighting the frequency each activity occurs in each program. Many of the programs do not focus on the more desired higher-level onboarding practices. Some of the programs, though, are designed in such a way to provide a specific set of practices perhaps at the expense of including higher level practices.

### A. NAVY EXECUTIVE ONBOARDING PRACTICES

OPM governs the SES program for all federal agencies providing assistance “as they develop, select, and manage their Federal executives” (Office of Personnel Management [OPM], n.d.-a). One of the tools provided by OPM is the *SES Onboarding Checklist* (OPM, n.d.-b), which helps guide agencies in the development of their onboarding strategy. To assess leadership development, five Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) have been established to define the desired competencies: “leading change, leading people, results driven, business acumen, and building coalitions” (OPM, n.d.-c). In its effort to promote high performing teams, the Navy utilizes these competencies in the development of its onboarding program. In partnership with the EMPO, as part of the DON’s OCHR, onboarding is initiated by the selecting official and the command point of contact. EMPO is the career life cycle of all executives in the Navy and works with newly onboarded executives to provide training opportunities that enhance the leader’s competencies surrounding the core qualifications (Department of the Navy [DON], n.d.-a). The experience is tailored dependent upon the position and whether the position is being filled by an internal promotion or external hire.

According to the *DON Executive Onboarding Guide (Guide)*, “the onboarding experience for executives begins with the recruitment process and ends at one year in the position” (DON, Agency guide, February 12, 2012). Commands can send their executives

to Navy sponsored training, but there are limited corporate-wide requirements. As an example, in fiscal year 2012, OCHR initiated the 21st Century Leadership course as part of the DON Executive Leadership Program, offering new executives the opportunity for “building individual capabilities by honing executive competencies, creating community across organizational boundaries, and strengthening commitment to Navy and Marine Corps greatness” (Anderson, 2011) Apart from such program offerings, commands may have few onboarding requirements beyond the basic standards for all its employees. The *Guide* only specifies two required onboarding tasks for new executives: (1) validate their biography, resume and training history during the open season, and (2) complete their self-assessment by logging into the Digital Training Management System (DON, Agency guide, February 12, 2012).

## **B. OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF NAVY ONBOARDING ACTIVITIES**

Civilian Navy leaders are given access to various senior executive development programs offered within DON, DOD, the federal government, and external universities and colleges. The onboarding model in Figure 2 reflects how frequently each onboarding activity is offered in all of the various executive development programs available internally to the DON and DOD.



\*\*Note the “Set up logistics” activity is usually performed within each individual command

Figure 2. Overall Navy Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

### C. ASSESSMENT OF ONBOARDING ACTIVITIES BY PROGRAM

The onboarding activities administered through the DON/DOD executive development programs more frequently fall in the grey shaded portion of the model, seen as more functional and administrative activities. These activities are offered 112 times, versus 53 for the more relational and transformational activities. These activities, seen in the shaded light and dark blue sections, fill a gap in offering essential activities for onboarding executives into an organization.

The chapter’s analysis included 18 Navy programs. To illustrate how onboarding fits into each of the programs, a brief description of the programs is presented to highlight the applicable activities. The courses were ranked based on the number and type of onboarding activities offered. Each activity offered in a program was given one point. To give greater weight to the more desired—higher-level—activities, those shaded in the light and dark blue were multiplied times two. The points were added together, which provided ranking for each of the programs, ranging anywhere from 32 to 5. If program scores were

tied, the course with the greatest number of points from the higher-level activities was chosen to be presented first. It is important to note that a higher score does not necessarily make a program better, it is simply a measure to indicate how these programs support the onboarding of executives.

**Program 1:** Strategic Planning for Execution: Assessment and Risk (SPEAR) Workshop (Total Score 32; High 10)



Figure 3. SPEAR Workshop Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** The SPEAR workshop provides Navy Captains, GS-15 civilian equivalents, and above the opportunity to bring a team from their command to work with a facilitator that guides them on how to develop, execute and assess strategic plans for their command. As an NPS hosted course, the program has a particular focus towards “desired outcomes, metric selection, and risk management” (DON, n.d.-a). One of the questions addressed during the workshop is: “how do you assess your objectives and select metrics that assure intended results” (DON, n.d.-a)?

**Analysis:** The SPEAR workshop provides many activities found in the onboarding model due to the multidimensional structure of the workshop, which is why the program received a high score of 32. Since the participants attend as part of a team with command

colleagues, they have the opportunity to better understand roles and responsibilities, schedule ongoing meetings, meet with direct reports, set performance measures, explore personal interaction styles, participate in cross-functional teams, and get early feedback from their executive team. There is opportunity to achieve personal growth as well to include establishing personal goals, identifying development opportunities, and receiving external coaching. Additionally, participation in the workshop creates space to better understand basic information regarding the organization’s strategy and culture including a review of procedures and policies, learning administrative procedures and about operations, understanding the mission, embracing ethics and values, and understanding social norms. Team leads frequently bring their peers to the workshop, providing the opportunity to establish an internal advocate within the organization, participate in peer support groups, and connect with senior leaders. These factors are critical towards planning for change management, conducting a stakeholder analysis, and developing a strategic plan for the organization.

**Program 2: Strategic Communication Workshop (SCW) (Total Score 30; High 10)**



Figure 4. SCW Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** Similarly, the SCW provides Navy Captains, GS-15 civilian equivalents, and above the opportunity to bring a team from their command to “[develop] and [implement] a strategic communication plan and process” (DON, n.d.-b). Also hosted by NPS, the program allows participants to work with a facilitator who guides and offers feedback while their team conducts an “in-depth stakeholder analyses, assess communication risk as it relates to [their] organization’s goals, and develop communication metrics to track desired effects” (DON, n.d.-b). Upon completing the program teams will have “an analysis of [their] command’s communication capabilities and a roadmap for strengthening communication as it relates to the...organization’s strategic initiatives” (DON, n.d.-b).

**Analysis:** The SCW is often a program that teams attend after the SPEAR workshop; the SPEAR workshop allows teams to begin by generating a strategic plan and then later teams can come back for the SCW to establish a strategy that effectively communicates that plan. As such, many of the same onboarding activities—with a few exceptions—exhibited through the SPEAR workshop are equally found in the SCW giving it a score of 30. The main exception can be seen in the activity of developing a strategic plan; this activity is expected to already be fulfilled prior to attending the SCW. Instead, planning strategic communication is achieved in this program. Learning administrative procedures and learning about the organization’s operations are activities that participants should have achieved prior to this program. “Perhaps the most important enabler for senior leaders (and perhaps all employees) is onboarding support that improves their ability to effectively interact with internal and external stakeholders” (Aten et al., 2019, p. 18). Executive team building is a highly recommended activity. The unique character of bringing a team from the executive’s command sets these two workshops apart, which is largely why none of the other subsequent programs come close in score.

**Program 3: CAPSTONE (Total Score 16; High 4)**



Figure 5. CAPSTONE Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “CAPSTONE is a...5-week intensive course consisting of seminars, case studies, informal discussions and visits to key U.S. military commands throughout the world. This course allows for interactions with American ambassadors, embassy staff, senior political and military leaders of foreign governments and combatant commanders of U.S. unified commands, and examines major issues affecting national security decision making, military strategy, joint/combined doctrine, interoperability and key allied nation issues. This course also allows SES to develop valuable networks while augmenting their enterprise, joint and national security competencies” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

**Analysis:** The CAPSTONE program really touches on the intersection of the basic information onboarding objective and the organizational goal of culture, which support its score of 16. The basic information activities include learning about operations, identifying development opportunities, understanding the mission, embracing ethics and values, and understanding roles and responsibilities. Concurrently, the culture activities include understanding social norms, planning for change management, and participating in cross-functional teams and peer support groups. By the program’s very nature, it achieves the

onboarding activity of participation in an experience tour. Finally, it achieves the objectives of executive support by providing a leadership class that allows the executives to connect with other senior leaders.

**Program 4:** Intermediate Flag and Executive Training Course (IFLEX) and Advanced Flag and Executive Training Course (AFLEX) (Total Score 15; High 4)



Figure 6. IFLEX and AFLEX Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “These two courses expand upon the fundamental material presented at NFLEX (described below) providing immersive and holistic leader development experiences that challenges leaders to think differently and to consider more deeply the need to be more adaptive in the face of the complex and ambiguous environment they will face in their new roles...The content of these courses is designed to disrupt and push senior leaders to challenge their own mental models and to fully partake in a range of discussions on pertinent topics that are infrequently addressed to include: unconscious bias, mental complexity, adult cognitive growth and organizational development. The objective is to better prepare them in addressing future challenges as senior leaders, moving them along a continuum from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset while also moving the Navy toward a learning culture” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

**Analysis:** The programs are for more advanced executives, the IFLEX being for DON Tier II SES and the AFLEX for TIER III SES, which support its score of 15. There are several higher-level onboarding activities offered in these programs to include planning for change management, exploring personal interaction style, connecting with senior leaders, and receiving external coaching. Other activities offered include understanding roles and responsibilities, embracing ethics and values, identifying development opportunities, understanding social norms, taking leadership classes, establishing personal goals, and acquiring program management skills. These programs offer a greater number of the higher-level activities than the NFLEX program due to the more senior audience.

**Program 5:** New Flag and Senior Executive Training Symposium (NFLEX) (Total Score 15; High 2)



Figure 7. NFLEX Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “NFLEX is a week-long intensive residential learning experience that is designed to ensure the successful transformation of new flag officers and SES into new roles as members of the Navy’s senior leadership team. The goal of NFLEX is to identify, develop, and enhance the personal insights, knowledge, and skills required

to transform from successful operators and managers into the executive leaders needed for the future Navy” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

**Analysis:** As a mandatory introductory program for new Navy executives NFLEX has a similar score, 15, to its more advanced IFLEX and AFLEX programs, though provides a different mix of onboarding activities. It has fewer higher-level activities but provides a greater number of the more basic activities. Executives do connect with other senior leaders. The program has a particular focus on activities under the organizational goal of personal growth, to include establishing personal goals, identifying development opportunities, creating a career road map, and exploring one’s personal interaction style. Additionally, there are several activities that are fulfilled through the onboarding objective of obtaining basic information: a review of the Navy’s procedures and policies, learning about operations, understanding the mission, embracing ethics and values, and understanding roles and responsibilities as a new Navy executive. Other activities not found in the more advanced programs include learning administrative procedures, taking leadership classes, and scheduling required training.

**Program 6:** Brigadier General Select Orientation Course (BGSOC) (Total Score 15; High 2)



Figure 8. BGSOC Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “This orientation course is for new SES members assigned to Headquarters Marine Corps. The BGSOC includes a one-day Senior Executive Equal Opportunity Seminar hosted by Manpower and Reserve Affairs’ Equal Opportunity Branch. Additionally, BGSOC attendees will be invited to attend a separate General Officer Warfighting Program. Attendance at BGSOC is mandatory for all newly selected Marine General Officers and Marine Corps SES” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

**Analysis:** Similar to its sister program, NFLEX, BGSOC is mandatory for all Marine Corps SES. Due to the purpose and nature of these programs, their analysis and rankings (15) are identical. There is something unique about this program, though, that touches on the uncommon culture found in the Marine Corps.

**Program 7: Leading Innovation (LI) Seminar (Total Score 14; High 5)**



Figure 9. LI Seminar Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** NPS also offers a set of Navy Executive Development Program (NEDP) courses specifically focused on senior executives, that include Navy flag officers and SES personnel. One of these programs, the LI seminar, “is designed to provide Navy leaders with both the skill set and mindset to understand the critical nature of innovation as it relates to organizational success in the Navy” (DON, n.d.-d). The “course

dives into best practices of innovation through case studies, small-team exercises, interactive class discussions, and targeted interactions with companies and speakers in the Silicon Valley” (DON, n.d.-d). Participants are “challenged to broaden their thinking process through exposure to new ideas and thoughtful examination of their own roles as ‘leaders of innovation’ in the Navy” (DON, n.d.-d).

**Analysis:** When evaluating the onboarding activities identified in the LI seminar, most fall within the executive support onboarding objective: participation in peer support groups, connecting with senior leaders, receiving external coaching, and taking a leadership class. Action planning as an onboarding objective is also built into the program with participants planning strategic communication, planning for change management, and acquiring program management skills. Five out of the seven activities identified so far fall into the higher-level activities as seen on the model, which support its score of 14. The program also allows attendees to identify other development opportunities and participate in experience tours through their visit to Silicon Valley.

**Program 8: DON Executive Leadership Program (DELP) (Total Score 13; High 4)**



Figure 10. DELP Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “Designed and facilitated by the University of North Carolina (UNC) Kenan-Flagler Business School in partnership with Korn Ferry...DELP has two parts. Part 1 is the executive leadership development program...Part 2 is the action learning business challenge program...DELP uses various learning tools and methods such as assessments, executive and action learning coaches, simulations, lectures, case studies and group exercises and culminates with Action Learning teams working with a Tier 3 SES champion/sponsor to solve real-world DON strategic business challenges” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

**Analysis:** All of DELP’s onboarding activities are higher-level, or close to it, providing its score of 13. The higher-level activities include participation in peer support groups, planning for change management, receiving external coaching, and exploring personal interaction style. Several of the activities fall into the organizational goal of skill development that include acquiring program management skills, participating in experience tours, and taking leadership classes. Other activities fall in the basic information onboarding objective: understanding the mission and identifying development opportunities.

**Program 9: DON Executive Coaching (Total Score 10; High 3)**



Figure 11. DON Executive Coaching Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “Executive coaching aids in an executive’s individual development for both current and future assignments. An executive coach will work with the executive to determine specific goals and lay out a plan to achieve them. The coaching helps clarify strengths to build on and opportunities for further development. Specific goals are set for each session and a coach will work with the executive to identify what success looks like, the path for getting there, specific action steps and a framework for ongoing self-reflection and measurement. This professional development opportunity also can be used in conjunction with the PROFILOR® 360° assessment tool, confidential sessions with an executive coach, and creation of an Executive Development Plan (EDP)” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

**Analysis:** Due to the type of program, most of the onboarding activities offered fall into the personal growth organizational goal: establishing personal goals, identifying development opportunities, creating a career road map, exploring personal interaction style, and receiving external coaching. These activities, along with the only other higher-level activity—developing a strategic plan—support its score of 10. The only other activity from the model that can be found in this program is setting performance measures, though this is more for the individual than it is between the executive and their supervisor.

**Program 10:** Advanced Professional Executive (APEX) Senior Executive Orientation (Total Score 10; High 1)

Goals	Functional	BASIC INFORMATION	ACTION PLANNING	STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT	Relational
RELATIONSHIP	Schedule ongoing meetings	Understand roles and responsibilities	Plan strategic communication	Get early feedback from executive team	Establish an internal advocate
CULTURE	Understand social norms	Embrace ethics and values	Plan for change management	Participate in cross-functional teams	Participate in peer support groups
STRATEGY	Set performance measures	Understand the mission	Develop a strategic plan	Conduct stakeholder analysis	Connect with senior leaders
PERSONAL GROWTH	Establish personal goals	Identify development opportunities	Create career road map	Explore personal interaction style	Receive external coaching
SKILL DEVELOPMENT	Learn administrative procedures	Learn about operations	Acquire program management skills	Participate in experience tours	Take leadership classes
COMPLIANCE	Set up logistics (Security, IT, parking)	Review procedures & policies	Schedule required trainings	Meet with direct reports	Meet with Supervisor

Figure 12. APEX Senior Executive Orientation Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “The APEX Senior Executive Orientation is a two-week DOD-wide Executive development opportunity designed to provide newly appointed Senior Executives with both a practical and theoretical understanding of the structure and processes of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Combatant Commands, the Joint Staff, and the Military Departments. Additionally, APEX helps new leaders gain an enterprise-wide perspective that encompasses expectations, opportunities and challenges currently facing DOD leadership. One week is spent in DC with interagency senior leaders, and the second week is spent ‘on the road’ at combatant commands and selected military installations. This week focuses on exposing the executives to service and joint operating concepts and environments” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

**Analysis:** APEX is a program for individuals with 1–3 years of executive experience, but only provides one higher-level onboarding activity, connecting with senior leaders. This leads to its relatively low score of 10. The majority of activities offered through this program fall within the organizational goal of skill development, which include learning administrative procedures, learning about operations, acquiring program

management skills, participating in experience tours, and taking leadership classes. Additionally, the program offers participants the opportunity to understand social norms within DOD, embrace enterprise-wide ethics and values, and better understand the agency’s mission.

**Program 11: Senior Acquisition Management Course (ACQ404) (Total Score 10; High 1)**



Figure 13. ACQ404 Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “This course provides senior decision makers an understanding of the defense acquisition system, an environment for candid and frank discussion of key processes, current issues and initiatives, and best practices and lessons learned. Course administrators provide participants a forum to discuss motivations, constraints, and varied perspectives of government, defense industry executives, the Congress, and the Government Accountability Office” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

**Analysis:** It is expected for executives to have an understanding of finances, particularly as they relate to the organization they are responsible for. As important as this topic is, this program offers only one higher-level onboarding activity, receiving external coaching. With that in mind, this course also ended up with a score of 10. The majority of the activities were offered in the onboarding objective of basic information, which include

reviewing procedures and policies, learning about operations, identifying development opportunities, understanding the mission, and understanding roles and responsibilities. The other activities were all within the organizational goal of skill development, which include learning about administrative procedures, acquiring program management skills, and taking leadership classes.

**Program 12: Strategic Thinking (ST) (Total Score 9; High 3)**

Goals	Functional Employee Orientation	BASIC INFORMATION	ACTION PLANNING	STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT	EXECUTIVE SUPPORT
RELATIONSHIP	Schedule ongoing meetings	Understand roles and responsibilities	Plan strategic communication	Get early feedback from executive team	Establish an internal advocate
CULTURE	Understand social norms	Embrace ethics and values	Plan for change management	Participate in cross-functional teams	Participate in peer support groups
STRATEGY	Set performance measures	Understand the mission	Develop a strategic plan	Conduct stakeholder analysis	Connect with senior leaders
PERSONAL GROWTH	Establish personal goals	Identify development opportunities	Create career road map	Explore personal interaction style	Receive external coaching
SKILL DEVELOPMENT	Learn administrative procedures	Learn about operations	Acquire program management skills	Participate in experience tours	Take leadership classes
COMPLIANCE	Set up logistics (Security, IT, parking)	Review procedures & policies	Schedule required trainings	Meet with direct reports	Meet with Supervisor

Figure 14. ST Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “The role of strategic thinking is to achieve a higher order frame of mind that imagines new and different futures, which may lead the organization to redefine its core strategies. The NEDP-ST course provides a collaborative, engaging environment for participants to examine a wide range of issues and learn new skills in topics ranging from cost/resource constraints/management, process transformation, human capital, to diversity, information technology and strategic execution” (DON, n.d.-e).

**Analysis:** The ST is similar to the LI in that it is an NEDP program hosted at NPS established only for senior leaders, so many of the same onboarding activities are achieved. Half of these programs are in the executive support onboarding objective to include participation in peer support groups, connecting with senior leaders, and taking a leadership

class. Though similar, two of the three fewer onboarding activities in the ST were lost from the higher-level (planning strategic communication and receiving external coaching), giving it a score of 9. Another activity offered is acquiring program management skills. There are two additional activities that align with the organizational goal of culture: understanding social norms and planning for change management.

**Program 13:** Vanguard Senior Executive Development Program (Vanguard) (Total Score 8; High 2)



Figure 15. Vanguard Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “Vanguard is the DOD’s premier executive development program designed specifically to equip SES members with tools to more effectively expand collaboration among components, federal agency partners, and mutual stakeholders toward successful mission accomplishment. Through Vanguard, SES members are offered the unique opportunity to form strategic partnerships with top-level executives and build upon their leadership capability to overcome evolving challenges such as constrained resources and mitigate increasingly varied threats to national security” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

**Analysis:** This advanced course requires a minimum of five years of executive experience, which often leads to participants who have at least a basic orientation to the DOD as an agency. With only six onboarding activities provided through the model, two are from the higher-level, which include developing a strategic plan and connecting with senior leaders. These, combined with the program’s five lower-level activities, make up its score of 8. Three of the lower-level activities fall within the onboarding objective of basic information, which include learning about operations, understanding the mission, and understanding roles and responsibilities. The last activity offered is taking leadership classes.

**Program 14:** DON 360 Assessments (Total Score 8; High 2)



Figure 16. DON 360 Assessments Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “The 360-feedback tool collects feedback from a variety of sources (self, managers, peers, direct reports, internal customers and others) regarding an individual’s performance. Feedback reports provide practical, well-rounded insights into job performances, strengths, and development needs, as well as paint a comprehensive picture of the specific skills that an individual needs to develop for enhancing performance.

It also provides a basis for creating an individualized, actionable development plan” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

**Analysis:** The DON 360 Assessment can be part of the DON Executive Coaching, which is why all but one of the onboarding activities are the same, developing a strategic plan. This activity is not included because the program is simply an assessment, as opposed to a clear road map of how to utilize the feedback in executing a strategy. Due to the loss of this higher-level activity, the program received a score of 8. Like the DON Executive Coaching all of the activities in the personal growth organizational goal are provided, in addition to the activity of setting performance measures.

**Program 15:** United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) Course (Total Score 8; High 1)



Figure 17. USCENTCOM Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “In this course, participants conduct strategic analysis in support of the development and implementation of plans and policies in support of a deployed joint task force conducting counter terrorism operations. Participants include principal staff officers for all matters concerning training, operations and plans, and force development and modernization. The training assists in preparing, coordinating,

authenticating, publishing, and distributing the command standard operating procedures; reviewing plans and orders for synchronization and completeness; recommending priorities for allocating critical resources; and recommending the task organization” (DOD, 2017, p. 41).

**Analysis:** The USCENTCOM course offers only one higher-level onboarding activity, developing a strategic plan. This leads to its low score of 8. A majority of its activities are provided through the basic information onboarding objective, which include understanding roles and responsibilities, understanding the mission, learning about operations, and reviewing procedures and policies. Two additional activities are offered through the skill development goal: acquiring program management skills and taking leadership classes.

**Program 16:** Navy Flag Officer and Senior Executive Symposium (NFOSES) (Total Score 7; High 1)



Figure 18. NFOSES Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “NFOSES is an annual event during which the CNO provides an update to the Navy’s Flag Officers and SES on the current state of affairs of the Navy,

the CNO’s leadership vision, mission and goals. Spouses are invited to attend an evening social” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

**Analysis:** This is not a traditional course, in that participants are not attending to acquire a set of new skills. The goal is to receive the latest updates from top-level executives from within the agency. Though important, provides for few onboarding activities, which leaves the program with a score of 7. The majority of activities are offered through the basic information onboarding objective including understanding roles and responsibilities, embracing ethics and values, understanding the mission, and learning about operations. There is one higher-level activity, connecting with senior leaders. The last activity provided through the program is understanding social norms, particularly as they relate to spouses’ roles through their partner’s position.

**Program 17:** U.S. Naval War College (NWC) (Total Score 5; High 0)



Figure 19. U.S. NWC Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “The U.S. NWC is a professional, graduate-level educational and research institution. Students earn...a master’s degree in either National Security and Strategic studies or Defense and Strategic Studies or a diploma. The College of Distance Education (CDE)...provides executive-level education to officers of the various military

services and senior Department of Defense and other Federal employees...These courses mirror, to a large degree, the program of study offered to resident students at the College's Newport, Rhode Island campus....The diploma program is designed to be completed in about 18–24 months” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

**Analysis:** NWC and NPS are the Navy’s two postgraduate education institutions, which offer various programs resulting in credits, certificates, and/or degrees. NWC provides a variety of programs, and so its score of 5 is based on the general onboarding activities offered through the program description, though additional activities are likely to be achieved depending on the program type. NWC and NPS would likely rank above the rest of these programs due to the nature of the postgraduate curriculum offerings. Based on the program description three of the activities are achieved through the basic information onboarding objective including understanding roles and responsibilities, embracing ethics and values, and understanding the mission. Two additional activities are offered through the organizational goal of skill development including acquiring program management skills and taking leadership classes.

**Program 18:** Career Executive Leadership Program (CELP) (Total Score 3; High 1)



Figure 20. CELP Onboarding Activities. Adapted from Aten et al. (2019, p. 10).

**Course Description:** “CELP is the Department’s premier leadership development program for executive leaders with over five years’ executive experience. Conducted by top academic professors from the University of North Carolina (UNC), Kenan-Flagler Business School, this course is held at the UNC’s Rizzo Conference Center, Chapel Hill, North Carolina” (DON, Catalog, March 19, 2019).

**Analysis:** CELP is another program for executives with more than five years of experience. It is less about onboarding executives, which is why there is only two onboarding activities identified, giving it the lowest score of 3. Both activities are in the executive support onboarding objective, one being within the higher-level, receiving external coaching. The other activity is taking leadership classes.

## V. DISCUSSION

Researchers at NPS interviewed Navy professionals (i.e., civilian executives, OCHR staff, and command staff) to gain a deeper understanding of the experience in onboarding Navy civilian executives. The analysis of interviews revealed inconsistencies that contribute to the gaps in the Navy's executive onboarding program. The interviewees are identified by job title in order to maintain their anonymity.

### A. FAILURE TO ASSOCIATE EXECUTIVE ONBOARDING WITH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Navy commands frequently failed to connect the onboarding of their executives to the executive's leadership development. According to a command staff personnel, one of the biggest barriers towards developing a robust Navy executive onboarding program is "not seeing onboarding as a part of the overall development of the executive as a leader." This is an observation seen more at the command level. The linkage to leadership development also differs from one command to the next, typically based on how well developed the executive onboarding process is. The more established organizations, which often have larger budgets, tend to link their onboarding programs to leadership development. Smaller commands typically do not have a robust HR staff that is able to support an executive counselor, an individual specifically tasked with onboarding and leadership development.

A failure to connect executive onboarding to leadership development can lead to executives not seeking or receiving a tailored program based on areas where they may not be fully sufficient. An example can be seen in an interview with an SESer: "I did not know the budget side and was not prepared for that. A command financial management 101 would have been nice. It would have been nice if somebody reached out and shared how the command does budgeting, HR, etc." With the level of responsibility entrusted to executives from day one, it is necessary for them to express what their needs are. It is also helpful for executives to come in on day one having command staff use a leadership

development lens and provide a menu of options based on the organization's procedures and best practices.

## **B. MILITARY VERSUS CIVILIAN EXECUTIVE ONBOARDING**

The Navy has leadership development programs for both active-duty and civilian executives, though the programs established for Navy Admirals are immeasurable in comparison to civilians. Admirals are the active-duty counterparts to Navy civilian executives and typically have an SES as their deputy, a key role in Admirals' assimilation into a new command. They are utilized as the organization's strategic continuity while military leadership transitions every few years. This leadership development gap creates Navy-wide inconsistencies in executive onboarding and can lead to mission failure at the command level. Heavily invested programs for Navy flag officers prepare Admirals as they transition into a new command, while civilian executive programs are not as successful in preparing personnel as they support Admirals' transition into a new command.

A number of interviews revealed the sophisticated and heavily invested onboarding program of active-duty executives. Not only do current military executives have many programs established within the agency, but leadership development is seen as an integral part of being a commissioned officer. This on-the-job training can be seen through flag officers' leadership and management of various Navy teams. One of the Navy's programs is the NFLEX. A Navy civilian executive interviewee described how the program was geared more towards the new flags and suggested that "something should be developed with more of an SES focus." By establishing a more dependable civilian executive onboarding program, it would not only support the civilian's leadership development, but also support the transition of military executives.

## **C. ESTABLISHING A MORE DEFINED PROGRAM FOR INTERNAL HIRES**

Distinctions exist between individuals hired from within the agency and those hired externally (i.e., private sector). Commands need to have a defined executive onboarding program for civilians hired internally versus external hires. Internally recruited Navy civilian executives often have a foundational understanding of the agency based on their

experience in previous roles. According to a Navy civilian executive, these “internal promotions often do not have a formal onboarding process.” Alternatively, those civilian executives hired from outside the agency are assisted in their transition by receiving what one Navy professional identified as “information and guidance on the culture and team dynamics of the organization.” The differences may be overlooked because civilian executives with no federal service background are more likely to have had a career outside of the Navy prior to becoming an executive. Therefore, programs tend to be organized for new, external hires. Commands must connect internal recruits to the mission of their new roles. Additionally, the agency does have room to better define a leadership development continuum that establishes opportunities for developing people internally, similar to programs often seen for military personnel.

#### **D. LACK OF AWARENESS**

In several interviews conducted for this research, Navy professionals identified the simple lack of awareness of the available executive development programs. In October 2016, Admiral Richardson released the Navy Civilian Workforce Framework (Framework) as a “first step toward identifying what the Navy can do to strengthen the civilian workforce, and by extension the Navy team as a whole” (DON, 2016). The Framework created a Navy Civilian Career Path model and strategic goals to guide commands and the Navy as a whole. One of the concerns expressed in the Framework describes how career path “functions are managed at the command level, with little insight into the broader Navy perspective” (DON, 2016). It goes on to acknowledge, “While the Navy must continue to provide sufficient flexibility to meet diverse command needs, we must also do more to share best practices and provide effective tools where required” (DON 2016). This statement from leadership is an admission to the lack of awareness across the Navy of executive development opportunities.

NPS researchers discovered concerns with the implementation requirements of the Framework. An interviewee from OCHR expressed confusion about the execution phase and the uncertainty around not “receiving any guidance from higher authority about what that looks like and how it needs to be implemented.” The Framework helps identify the

gap, though OCHR needs to do more to provide a pathway towards implementation at the command level.

The Framework also fails to connect its model with ECQs and fails to ensure that commands link their goals to them. There was also a feeling, usually from smaller commands, that there was not an assigned command POC to facilitate the onboarding of executives. One item that could be tasked to this POC could be the management of the executive onboarding checklist discussed in Chapter IV, Section B. One executive shared, “in regard to providing items on the checklist, like creating a list of key stakeholders, the interviewee does not know who [the organization] thought was going to do that.” The same executive questioned the SES onboarding checklist, “what are nameplates, flags, and business cards? Maybe in Washington that is how it works.” It is important for staff to tailor this checklist, so it meets the command needs and requirements for the executive position. Developing better awareness of the needs for a specific executive position, and how they connect with the Navy’s overall objectives, can provide better awareness of how the position fits within the overall mission of the agency.

## **E. INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS**

Establishing relationships with internal stakeholders would be an activity that would reside in the upper-right section of the executive onboarding activities model presented in Chapter II, Section B. This activity requires transformational goal setting, supporting a proactive leadership style that promotes innovative ideas. In addition, establishing these internal relationships is a highly relational onboarding objective, requiring the executive to develop relationships with key players internal to the organization.

Connecting executives to internal stakeholders should be a standard onboarding practice. While interviewing Navy civilian professionals, the NPS researchers often heard of efforts to connect the executives to their external partners (i.e., customers). Alternatively, the idea of a formal process in connecting a new executive to internal stakeholders was either lacking or nonexistent. One DOD executive describes this gap: “The executive coming in gets set up, often, to spend more time with peers and internal

customers than they do with their own team and getting their own team's perspective on what is happening." Commands need to be just as strategic when establishing internal relationships for executives as they are with external stakeholders.

According to OPM, when an agency is establishing its onboarding administration and implementation, they should consider the core leadership competency of "navigating internal networks and relationships" (OPM, 2011, p. 9). This is not something that should be left only to the onboarding program, but OPM also suggests that the "leader needs to ask themselves and/or their mentor: What strategic relationships and internal networks should I be aware of?" (OPM, 2011, p. 19). The Navy should utilize the OPM recommendations and support commands in tailoring an onboarding program to assist new executives in developing key internal stakeholders.

#### **F. MEASURE DESIRED OUTCOMES**

Measuring desired outcomes assists any organization in the management of its onboarding program. Through the interviews conducted, NPS researchers discovered that executives frequently use intuition to guide changes in their HR activities, even though research shows "perhaps the greatest problem is the lack of credible measures that relate to people and their value" (Mayo, 2014, p. 475). It emphasizes a quote by Peter Drucker, "What gets measured, gets managed" (Klaus, 2015, p. 81). Initial onboarding programs may be subjective, but in order to improve those programs executives should leverage data to measure desired outcomes.

Executive's first step in measuring outcomes begins with the need to identify areas of organizational development that can be measured. One executive described, "with regard to onboarding, I do not know anybody that does it well...that produces the desired outcomes." Speaking from a Navy-wide perspective, a staff member from OCHR identified that they "currently do not have a survey in place." Surveys are a common way for an organization's managers and HR practitioners to measure desired outcomes and should be leveraged to make improvements to their onboarding program. Whether it is a survey, some ratio (i.e., turnover), or a combination of measures, implementing an effective

executive onboarding process the agency, and its commands, requires clearly defined measures in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Applying the “Executive Onboarding Activities” model to analyze the Navy’s current civilian executive onboarding programs and practices revealed several gaps. Of these gaps, failure to associate executive onboarding with leadership development and the need to align onboarding activities to executive development programs seem particularly detrimental to the Navy’s onboarding of civilian executives. These recommendations are presented below but the conclusion also clarifies the study’s limitations and opportunities for future research.

### **A. RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **1. Connect Onboarding and Leadership Development**

A major gap identified in this research is the inability of organizations to link onboarding with leadership development. Neglecting to make this connection yields a deficient onboarding program, limiting the organization’s ability to retain top talent and prepare current employees for future leadership roles. As noted in Chapter V, Section A, this failure in the Navy is evident mostly at the command level, particularly for smaller commands that may not have staff and funding specifically dedicated to support the leadership development of civilian executives. Without the dedicated support, executives often miss out on opportunities to participate in tailored programs that aid in their development. Given the level of responsibility entrusted to executives, it is necessary for command staff to prepare a tailored leadership development plan with them on day one. OCHR should train their HR practitioners to fundamentally understand the connection between leadership development and the organization’s onboarding practices and prepare the HR professionals to guide executives in leadership development mapping.

#### **2. Further Align Current DON/DOD Executive Development Programs with Onboarding Activities**

There are opportunities to align the 18 current DON/DOD program curricula discussed in Chapter IV, Section C, so that they better achieve the desired higher-level onboarding activities in the Overall Navy Onboarding Activities model in Figure 2. As

opposed to creating new policies and procedures, this solution leverages existing programs to make them more effective at meeting the needs of the various Navy commands. Some are already successful at achieving these goals, as discussed in the analysis of the programs, while others have greater opportunities at meeting the higher-level onboarding activities. When assessing the programs against the model, oftentimes several or all of the activities associated with a particular organizational goal apply to the same program. As an example, the DON Executive Coaching program provides all of the activities in the personal growth organizational goal. It may be best for each program to focus on activities that align with an organizational goal that is already a strength for that program.

## **B. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

As part of this thesis, Navy-wide interviews were conducted providing a broad overview of the Navy's onboarding programs and practices, but this limited the depth of evaluating any one role amongst the various Navy professionals involved in the assimilation of civilian executives. As an example, additional interviews could be conducted to look specifically at HR practitioners and their role in onboarding Navy civilian executives. Alternatively, creating a command implementation case study can provide valuable details to refine this study's recommendations. The researchers of this study also did not have any authority to implement this thesis's recommendations. Finally, the research recognizes the benefits of a tailored approach but additional analysis may help to further validate this method of executing onboarding.

Future research might develop a case study of a Navy command implementing this study's recommendations to see how the theory of onboarding compares to a real-world application. Further studies might also look into specific DOD/DON program curricula to evaluate inclusion of higher-level onboarding practices that currently lack programmatic offerings. This may also create recommendations to establish new programs. Finally, commands should consider the benefits associated with participation in tailored programs. Acculturation provided through a tailored onboarding experience allows executives to set the tone at the top. This approach to leadership development is particularly relevant as organizations quickly adapt to changes in today's fast-paced and competitive environment.

The upfront investment in leadership development will support Navy commands' efforts in meeting organizational goals.

### **C. CONCLUSION**

This research focused on developing a model based on industry best practices, analyzed the onboarding practices for Navy civilian executives, and highlighted gaps. This study's analysis suggests that a transformational leadership style supports an organization's goals and objectives. Additionally, the research finds that relational activities are essential elements often overlooked when onboarding executives. The Executive Onboarding Activities model could improve and standardize Navy civilian executive leadership development with transformative organizational goals and relational onboarding activities.

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