

LEADERSHIP Excellence

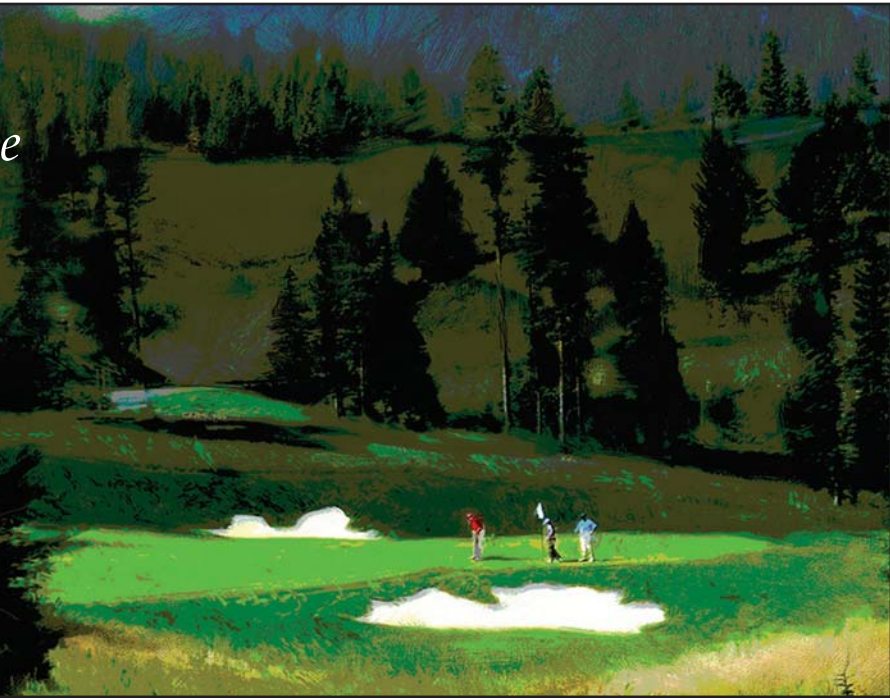
Warren Bennis



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Leadership Challenge

Try leading or playing golf at 7,500 feet against the backdrop of the Rocky Mountains in Big Sky, Montana on the Reserve Course at Moonlight Basin. Bonus: your ball soars further at altitude: gain an added 10 percent on a full swing.



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Great Leaders Connect

Using their vision, value and voice.



by Michael Lee Stallard

GREAT LEADERS CONNECT with the people they lead so they feel like part of the organization. One leader who understood this was Admiral Vern Clark, the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) from 2000 until his retirement in 2005. The CNO is the principal naval adviser to the President on the conduct of war. When Clark assumed the CNO role, the Navy was not meeting its sailor retention goals. He made winning the war for talent the number one priority and promptly began developing a culture where sailors felt connected to the Navy. He did this by focusing on the *three elements of culture* that make people feel connected to their organization: vision, value and voice.

- **Vision.** Admiral Clark described a vision that made sailors feel proud to be in the Navy. He said the Navy's mission is to take the "war fighting readiness" of the United States to any corner of the world at a moment's notice and it was "our turn to make history" by "building a Navy for the 21st century" that would be "strategically and operationally agile, technologically and organizationally innovative, networked at every level, highly joint (with the other services), and effectively integrated with allies." He told them: "What we do matters. What we do is hard work. We put ourselves in harm's way. We are away from our loved ones for months on end. We do it because it's important and we are people of service. We are committed to something larger than ourselves: the protection of America's interests around the world and democracy." Rear Admiral Frank Thorpe, who was on Clark's staff, said that he spotted a sailor with tear-filled eyes after hearing Admiral Clark speak. Thorpe asked the young man what was wrong. The sailor told him that he was going to ask his Commanding Officer to rip up the discharge papers he had submitted. "For the first time," he said, "a leader told me why I should stay in the Navy."

- **Value.** Admiral Clark made each sailor feel valued. Clark described his strategy as using the Navy's "asymmet-

rical advantages" of the "best technology in the world" combined with the "genius of our people." When Navy budget officials proposed cuts related to developing people, Clark wouldn't allow it. Instead, he increased the training budget. And, he strongly supported an increase in pay (approved by the President and Congress). As part of his *Revolution in Training*, he established the *Naval Education and Training Command* with 12 *Navy Centers of Excellence*. He required everyone in the Navy to have a *personal development plan*. He changed the performance appraisal system to provide *constructive feedback* for everyone and added the requirement to leaders' performance appraisals that they help sailors learn and grow. He liked to say, "if you are not growing, you're dead."

In the Navy, sailors who are part of



the enlisted class can at times feel like second-class citizens as compared to the officer class. Clark made it a *priority to blur the lines* between the officer and enlisted classes while maintaining the decision-making chain of command. When he traveled, Admiral Clark met with COs and with Master Chiefs (leaders of the enlisted class) and asked them to value the sailors under their leadership and see to it that they prospered: "The young sailors under our command swear to support and defend the U.S. Constitution from all enemies, and we as leaders need to make promises in return. We need to give them the training and resources to enable them to fulfill their promise."

Clark said the advice he received from a Master Chief when he was a young CO helped make him a better officer. He invited the Master Chiefs to mentor today's young sailors in that same way. Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Jim Herdt, head of all Master Chiefs, told me that the Master Chiefs worldwide had the general atti-

tude that "Old Vern (Clark) is counting on us; we can't let him down."

Clark changed legacy systems that made sailors feel devalued. One such system was the Navy's job assignment process. Under Clark and a program he dubbed "*the revolution in personnel distribution*," the system was changed to a job bidding approach with incentive compensation provided to the jobs and locations that were in the least demand. As a result, the percentage of sailors forced into positions or locations they didn't want was reduced from 30 percent to around 1.5 percent.

- **Voice.** Admiral Clark made everyone feel like they had a voice in most decisions. He encouraged participants to speak up. His own approachable, conversational speaking style set the tone for others to share their ideas and opinions. He asked everyone to "challenge every assumption," "be data driven," and "drill down" into the details. He challenged them to "have a sense of urgency to make the Navy better every day" in order to deliver greater efficiencies and readiness for the dollars America invested in the Navy.

Clark was more concerned about getting it right than being right himself. He encouraged *constructive friction*. This made it safe for people to disagree and express views that were outside of the consensus view. As a result, Clark's leaders felt connected to him and to the U.S. Navy and emulated his leadership style, which made the sailors under their command feel more connected.

Vern Clark is a humble man and is quick to say that he's not perfect. Still, the Navy achieved *impressive gains* during his tenure as CNO and naval leaders praise his leadership and positive impact. In 18 months after Admiral Clark became CNO, first term re-enlistment soared from 38 to 56.7 percent.

As the Navy improved sailor retention and developed greater alignment with Admiral Clark's vision, it became faster and more responsive. Within hours after the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001, aircraft carriers, Aegis destroyers and cruisers were in position to protect America's shores. Naval leaders anticipated what had to be done and took action before they received orders. At the Pentagon, command and control of the Navy was quickly reestablished and planning for America's response began while the embers of the fire from the terrorist attack still smoldered. **LE**

Michael Lee Stallard speaks, teaches and writes about leadership and engagement. He is the primary author of Fired Up or Burned Out. Visit www.epluribuspartners.com.

ACTION: Instill vision, recognize value, add voice.