



EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Great Leaders Connect With the People They Lead

by Michael Lee Stallard

“What we do matters.
What we do is hard
work.” Admiral Vern
Clark inspires those
around him and
answers their “why.”

Every organization's success requires employees who are engaged. Research consistently shows that 75 percent of employees in organizations are not engaged and not giving their best efforts at work. This is true because in most organizations approximately 25 percent of the people (leaders and influencers) hold the lion's share of power, control, and influence. The problem stems from the fact that leaders fail to reach out and connect with employees at large so they feel like part of the organization, too.

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

To begin, 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 would tell them: "What we do matters. What we do is hard work. We intentionally 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 Thorp, who was on Clark's staff, recounted an occasion when he spotted a sailor with tear-filled eyes after hearing Clark speak. Thorp approached the young man to see what was wrong. The sailor told him that he was going to ask his commanding officer to rip up the discharge papers he had recently submitted. "For the first time," he said, "a leader told me why I should stay in the Navy."

Value

Second, Clark made each sailor feel valued—that he could make a difference. Clark described his strategy as using the Navy's "asymmetrical advantages" of the "best technology in the world" combined with the "genius of our people." When Navy budget officials proposed cuts related to training and developing people as part of the annual planning cycle, Clark wouldn't allow it. Instead, he increased the training budget.

In addition, he strongly supported an increase in pay that was approved by the President and Congress. He increased the training budget to support personal and professional growth. As part of what Clark called the "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. To make his point about how much he valued personal growth and continuous improvement, Clark liked to say, "If you are not growing, you're dead."

As the Navy improved sailor retention and developed greater alignment with Clark's vision, it became faster and more responsive.

In the Navy, sailors who are part of the enlisted class can at times feel like second-class citizens when compared to the officer class. Clark understood this and made it one of his priorities to "blur the lines" between the officer and enlisted classes while still maintaining the necessary decision-making chain of command.

When he traveled to commands and bases around the world, Clark not only met with commanding officers but also met with master chiefs (who are the leaders of the enlisted class). He asked the master chiefs to value the sailors under their leadership and see to it that they prospered. Clark told the Master Chiefs "these 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. We need to give them an opportunity to prove what they can do."

Clark said the advice and encouragement he received from a master chief when he was a young commanding officer helped make him a better officer and he needed, and our country needed, the master chiefs to mentor and encourage today's young sailors in that same way. Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Jim Herdt, the head of all of the master chiefs, told me that the master chiefs around the world had the general attitude that "Old Vern (Clark) is counting on us and we can't let him down." Clark's comments made the master chiefs feel valued and when they in turn reached out to help those under their command learn and grow, it helped the sailors feel valued, too.

Clark changed legacy systems that made sailors feel devalued. One such system was the Navy's job assignment



Photos courtesy of U.S. Navy

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.

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Voice

Finally, Admiral Clark made everyone feel like they had a voice in most decisions. He encouraged participants to speak up. His 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” 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 what he referred to as “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 they emulated his leadership style, which made the sailors under their command feel more connected.

Clark is a humble man and he is quick to say that he’s not perfect. Nonetheless, the Navy achieved some impressive gains during his tenure as CNO and the naval leaders I interviewed praised his leadership and positive impact. Some 18 months after he became CNO, first term re-enlistment soared from less than the Navy’s goal of 38 percent to 56.7 percent.

As the Navy improved sailor retention and developed greater alignment with Clark’s vision, it became faster and more responsive. Within a matter of hours following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, aircraft carriers, and Aegis destroyers and cruisers were in position to protect America’s shores. This was due in part to the fact that naval leaders anticipated what had to be done and took action before they received orders.

At the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., 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 a short distance away.

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