

Leadership, Culture, and Operational Excellence

A symbiotic relationship

by Col Mark Schulte & Maj Robert V. Rubio

Leadership in all ranks contributes an important part in a unit's culture. Leadership and culture are intertwined. Culture is shaped by our interactions with others and is developed over time. Culture becomes embedded within the unit's rules and accepted values and plays an important role in how an organization executes its assigned tasks. Culture is unique to every unit. For example, a unit can be known for its warfighting history or its legendary leaders and heroes. LtGen Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines during World War II successfully defended Henderson Field on Guadalcanal against a regiment-sized Japanese force. The kill ratio was about 20 to 1. Leadership can either accept the unit's culture or foster a change for the betterment of the organization.

In 1992 Col Alan Groben, Air National Guard, researched what made some units better than others. From his research came the Air National Guard Cultural Assessment Program and the culture workshop (CW) statement: "Operational Excellence exists on a foundation of Trust, Integrity, and Leadership, created and sustained through effective Communication."

In 1996 the Naval Aviation Human Factors Quality Management Board (HFQMB) was chartered to "reduce the human error flight mishaps by 50% by FY-00 [fiscal year 2000]." One of the human factor strategies adopted by the HFQMB was a derivative of the National Guard Cultural Assessment Program called the CW.

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From 1996 to 2005 the Naval Safety Center (NSC) was the sole sponsor of the CW for naval aviation. CW facilitators were a combination of NSC staff, both Navy and Marine Corps, and selected Navy reservists. While the Navy was the primary customer, Marine Corps squadrons have increasingly requested this program. Why? It provides the commander a snapshot of his unit and identifies po-

tential human factor problems. The results are impressive. During FY04-05 there were 47 Class A naval aviation mishaps. Of the 168 squadrons (64 percent of the total Navy/Marine Corps squadrons) that conducted a CW, only 7 had a Class A mishap after a workshop. Squadrons that failed to conduct a CW accounted for 85 percent of all Class A mishaps.

In April 2005 the Marine Corps' 11th Executive Safety Board weighed in on the Marine Corps' support for this program to include training facilitators. Marine Forces Reserve was tasked with identifying billets to support the NSC from within 4th Marine Aircraft Wing (4th MAW). Additionally, Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC)

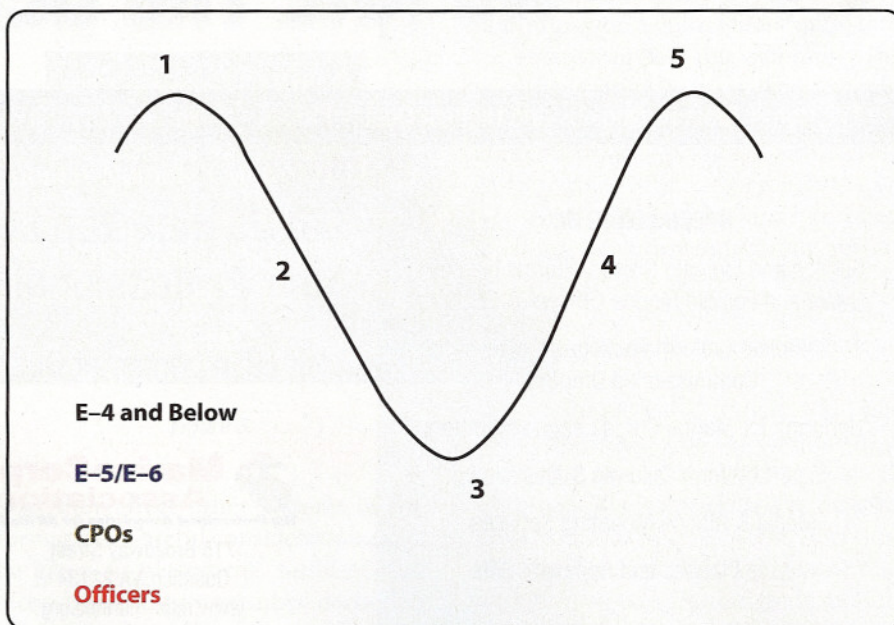


Figure 1. Command life cycle.

Safety Division (SD) was tasked with assisting in the development of a ground CW program. During November 2005 CMC SD beta tested what is now called the "Commander's Warrior Workshop" (CWW) at Camp Lejeune using aviation CW facilitators. The beta tests were successful, and CMC SD trained selected Marine officers to become CWW facilitators in order to conduct more CWWs throughout the ground combat element. As of 31 December 2006, 16 ground units have completed a CWW.

CWW

The CWW is conducted by trained Marine Corps facilitators to administer group workshops among the ranks of a battalion-sized unit. The CWW is a self-assessment tool for the commander to identify and/or validate his organizational effectiveness. It is a 2¹/₂-day process, and the information derived from the workshops stays with the unit commander. This program is not an inspection or a safety tool, and it should not interrupt a battalion's operational tempo (OpTempo). It's a program requested by the unit commander to assess the current culture and climate and is tailored to support the ground commander. The CWW is still in its infancy and is gaining attention by word of mouth from commanders who have gone through this voluntary process.

Table 1 lays out the difference between the aviation CW and the CWW. However, both workshops start off with an in-brief, followed by one-on-one interviews. Why one-on-one interviews? Some are more comfortable talking in a private situation vice an open forum. The interviews are followed by group seminars discussing topics based on communications, trust, and integrity. Unit trends are identified and are further discussed and validated during the seminars. Upon completion, the facilitator conducts a private debrief to the commanding officer. One particular note about this program is that there is zero out-brief to

higher command. The only information derived from the workshops provided to higher command is in aggregated form based solely upon the current trends and issues affecting our ground forces and not how a particular unit commander is leading his unit.

As a facilitator for CMC SD I've conducted multiple CWW seminars for battalions with varying OpTempos. I guide the discussions to the Marine participants based on communications, trust, and integrity—the pillars of "operational excellence." Leadership issues are never challenged. That is not the purpose of a CWW. A CWW is a "barometer" for the commander to as-

This program is not an inspection or a safety tool. . . .

sess and validate his own leadership. It is also fair to add that the CWW may or may not reduce or prevent future mishaps (as experienced by some of our aviation units that completed a CW). Ground commanders are more interested in utilizing the CWW to understand the unit's perception on organizational effectiveness. However, the CWW is an identifier that can assist in the first step to operational risk management (ORM); that is, to identify the hazards that can lead to a mishap.

Aviation CW

4th MAW took ownership of the aviation CW facilitator team in spring 2006. To date we have four officers fully trained and supporting the NSC, facilitating both Navy and Marine squadrons. As the officer in charge of this team and a trained CW facilitator, I have been impressed with this process and what it gives the commander. I was also a member of the team that did the beta test of the CWW at Camp Lejeune. It didn't surprise me that this pro-

gram would work for the ground commanders. After all, it is the process that works; who participates is not important.

What allows Marines and sailors to discuss sensitive issues with senior officers? The first thing we establish is that the CW team is there at the request of the squadron commander. The second thing we establish is that what an individual says stays in the room. However, what the seminar discusses as a whole will be reported. The last thing we establish is that everything we find goes directly to the unit commander and doesn't leave with the CW team. Finally, we establish this process as being similar to the first step in the ORM process, "Identify the Hazards."

Each seminar lasts approximately 2 hours. The bulk of the seminar focuses on three of the four pillars of an operationally excellent unit—communications (up and down the chain of command and among peers), trust in people (up and down the chain of command and among peers) and, finally, integrity in programs, such as Naval Air Training and Operating Procedures Standardization or unit standing operating procedures (SOPs). Finally, we do a sine wave exercise. We tell them that all units have cycles and highs and lows. We draw Figure 1 on the board. A unit at Position 1 is at the top of its game, but there are issues on the horizon that may start it on the downslope. Position 2 indicates that the unit is off the top of its game and issues have started to have an effect. Position 3 indicates that the unit is at the bottom of its game (not good). Position 4 indicates that the unit was at the bottom but is now moving up (can be due to a recent change of command). Position 5 indicates that the unit is back on its game and continues to get better. By the color code assigned by rank, we put the number of responses next to each position and try to get the "why" behind the workshop's reasoning.

The bottom line is that both the CW and CWW are valuable tools that all unit commanders should take advantage of. Table 2 offers feedback by

	Navy Aviation	Marine Aviation	Marine Ground
Length	2 days (longer for large squadrons)	2 days (longer for large squadrons)	2.5 days
Personnel	12-15	12-15	15-20
Duration	2 hours	2 hours	2 hours
First Seminar	E1-E4	E1-E3	E1-E3 x 2
Second Seminar	E5-E6	E4-E5	E4-E5 x 2
Third Seminar	E7-E9	E6-E8	E6-E8
Fourth Seminar	Officers and CMC	Officers	Junior Officers
Fifth Seminar	Department Heads	Department Heads	Senior Leadership

Table 1. Aviation and ground seminar comparison.

commanders after completing a CW/CWW.

Pillar Trends of the CW/CWW

Communications is the first pillar of operational excellence and is the backbone for any leader from the fire team leader/shop supervisor to the battalion/squadron commanding officer. Whether it is verbal or not, communications must be fully understood in order to get the job done and in an efficient manner. In every unit that I have had the pleasure to facilitate, communications breakdown was pervasive up and down the chain of command. It didn't matter whether the unit was on a predeployment or postdeployment status. Any information passed from leadership goes through much iteration down to the platoon level. The intent is accomplished but not in an efficient manner. Also, it is common to have many last minute changes affecting the way Marines get the job done. Although we must adapt to our changing environment, the command must maintain a communications process that is effective in getting the "word" out to the Marines. This is a challenge when your end strength is 800 to over 1,000 Marines. The common commu-

nications complaints are:

- The word changes too much.
- The word is last minute and reduces the quality of the work.
- The word is inconsistent.

Inconsistent information is the result of not fully understanding or obtaining feedback from communicating. Marines don't like inconsistency, especially if it affects mission accomplishment, leave periods and, more importantly, the Marines' families. When inconsistent information is passed it creates a form of distrust. I have spoken to many corporals, sergeants, and staff noncommissioned officers (SNCOs) about this. The corporals and sergeants voiced that time management is affected by inconsistent information. And the SNCOs and junior officers would agree with the inconsistency but feel this is a "head shed" problem. Also, the SNCOs feel they can't be active in getting the job done if there is inconsistent information being passed. Although the problem can be directed toward command leadership, it is incumbent on every Marine in a leadership position to properly address issues through good feedback and mutual understanding. If not, trust toward

leadership is greatly affected, and the communications process will break down within a unit.

Trust is the second pillar of operational excellence and is defined by our workshop as "confidence in the ability character, or truthfulness of a person or thing." For the purpose of the workshop we don't discuss material things, such as weapons or vehicles. They would be discussed during the integrity portion of the workshop. To properly discuss trust, you must first address the issue of the "likeability" factor. For example, you can trust a Marine to do his job and not like the person himself. Further, trust can be distinguished based on two factors, rank/position or knowledge/experience. Some Marines agree that there is a certain level of trust given initially based on rank and position of authority. But the majority of Marines believe that trust is based mostly on knowledge and experience. This is commensurate to the units' camaraderie in our current wartime operations. The units that have conducted CWWs have been deployed to Iraq. Also, Marines will trust an individual if that person has a genuine concern for troop welfare and is approachable. During a workshop you will find a

CWW

- “The workshop is a superb opportunity to get an objective view of the battalion’s culture.”
- “Great feedback from all levels within the battalion—some positive, some negative, but all worthwhile.”
- “The workshop went well beyond what I had expected, and I was extremely happy with the whole process. It was a healthy exercise that I intend to do again.”
- “I began acting on what I learned immediately. To do otherwise would make the entire workshop a waste of effort.”
- “Great program. I think any commander would want to go through this process, but only as long as the information is kept strictly confidential.”

Aviation CW

- “If I'd had this 2 months ago, I'd have two more live Marines.”
- “Excellent program. Extremely valuable visit.”
- “This is the best example of a program that is here to help.”
- “A must! Doesn't cost anything and has the potential to save lives.”
- “Would highly recommend this program to any squadron.”

Table 2. Commanders' comments.

handful of “trustworthy” Marines ranging from the platoon sergeant to the company commander. It is also noteworthy to say that most Marines in a battalion have very little interaction with the battalion commander or executive officer. A lance corporal’s world is his platoon, and the large size of a battalion may preclude senior leadership interaction. That is why good communications, genuine concern for Marines/sailors, and “management by walking around” are important assets to every leader. (See Table 2.)

Integrity is the final pillar discussed during a CW/CWW. It is defined as “a rigid adherence to a code or standard of values.” Integrity can be further broken down to personal integrity and program integrity. With respect to personal integrity, it basically boils down to “doing the right thing, when no one’s watching.” It’s about professionalism, being a positive mentor, and being a Marine 24/7. All workshop participants agree there is a certain level of professionalism, on and off duty. As

Marines we are held to a higher standard. Our demeanor and how we carry ourselves differentiates us from the other Armed Services. During the integrity discussion, we discuss the following topics:

- Alcohol/drugs.
- Racism/equal opportunity.
- Fraternalization.
- Hazing.
- Awards/nonjudicial punishment (NJP).
- Mentorship.
- Training/SOPs.

It is noticeable that predeployment units have high integrity (lower incidents of alcohol use, drugs, NJPs, fraternalization, and hazing). Units that are in a predeployed status—meaning they are in their workup period—are OpTempo driven and tend to be more focused on training. Postdeployment units typically have lower integrity (higher incidents of alcohol use, drugs, NJPs, fraternalization, and hazing). You must remember that there are no statistics for these statements. The in-

tegrity trends were based on all facilitated discussions among the units that completed a CW or CWW. These trends were further validated during multiple seminars for the specific unit. On a positive note, there were no issues of racism or lack of equal opportunity in the seminars in which I facilitated.

Safety: A Byproduct of Operational Excellence

The word safety has been overused throughout the years. We hear it on the firing range, in mission planning, and definitely in safety briefs. But we must remember what it really means: preserving our assets (human and material) to successfully accomplish any mission by understanding the hazards involved and to eliminate them or reduce them. The CW and CWW can assist the commander in identifying hazards or unit trends. It is ultimately up to the commander to use these voluntary tools to achieve operational excellence.

