

How a Leader Manages Risk: Be Engaged

From day one in the service, you are constantly reminded that the Navy is about developing leaders, officer and enlisted alike. It isn't just the top end of the spectrum: senior officers intimately involved in planning and executing complex operations involving myriad units over a long period of time. The seaman in charge of a small work detail, doing routine daily maintenance, is equally a leader.

In all cases and nearly every day, you are given chances to exercise and develop your leadership skills. As you gain knowledge and experience, your skills mature. You start making the sound decisions essential to high-quality leadership. Not all decisions revolve around hazards, yet understanding hazards and the risk they present is a central part of what you do every day.

Risk is inherent in any job. Whether you are doing the task or assigning it to someone else, as a leader you must assess the hazards and manage the risk. One of the simplest ways to do that is to be an engaged leader. There are three hallmarks of this kind of leader:

1. They teach risk-management techniques to the people who work for them.
2. They clearly define acceptable risk and the consequences of not managing that risk effectively.
3. They find the resources required to support decisions about acceptable and unacceptable risk.

Everyone is responsible for identifying hazards and communicating the risks. Therefore, you must take every opportunity to educate those who work for you in this process. ORM provides the framework and some tools that can make this process easier, but it is not a stand-alone "program." It must be integrated into the basic tactics, techniques and procedures taught at all levels across the Fleet, both in formal classroom settings and on the job.

Often individuals or small groups must make risk decisions within the context of tasking or orders. They must understand the risk-management process and be able to communicate information about those hazards through the chain of command. If you tolerate a situation where junior personnel are unaware of hazards—or underestimate those hazards—you're asking for trouble.

Good communication is essential to risk management.

Everyone must understand they have a role to play. Knowing about a hazard isn't enough. It must be communicated to the right people so that the risk may be assessed and appropriate decisions made. Communication is critical to ensure you have the resources necessary for you to manage risk and implement controls.

Asking questions is perhaps the single most powerful and easiest technique to opening the lines of communication. Remember that risk is inherent in action; action has consequences; and consequences drive behavior. The consequences, good and bad, of decisions about risk should be spelled out and individuals held accountable for their decisions.

Resources are always limited, but as leaders it is your responsibility to ensure that the people working for you have everything they need to do the job. They need formal and informal education. You have to provide personal protective gear and monitor whether they're using it. You also have to make sure that your workers have the tools they need to manage risk off-duty, as well.

You are operating in a world full of hazards, but you have the opportunity everyday to practice engaged leadership and hone your skills at managing the risk those hazards present. We can't prove how many accidents or mishaps have been prevented by good risk management, but you can see the consequences of not managing it. Perhaps it's the guy who usually wears a seat belt but didn't do it for that short drive to the grocery store, and that was the time he got in a wreck. Maybe it was a pilot's unusual decision to fly low through a canyon for the sake of the thrill—a flight that ended in a Class A mishap.

Take the time to accept the philosophy of risk management, lead by example and make managing risk an essential element of all that you do. Provide the tools and resources required to do the job. Communicate the expectation that risk management is everyone's responsibility. Educate those who work for you in the techniques and procedures that are the tools of risk management. Making good decisions based on an understanding of risk is a learned skill. Cultivate it in yourself and others. Live it on and off duty, whether someone is watching or not. Make it personal. Stay engaged. ■

By Cdr. Allen McCoy

ORM Division Head, Naval Safety Center