



CHARACTERISTICS OF AN INNOVATIVE DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY



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CHARACTERISTICS OF AN INNOVATIVE DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY

The mission of the Department of the Navy requires strategic thinking, operational excellence and coordination of complex issues in geographically dispersed, stressful conditions. Structure and hierarchy are critical components to success. At the same time, the DON must anticipate, adapt, and thrive in a rapidly changing environment, which requires freedom, the flexibility to innovate at all levels, and the ability to flatten the organization, break-down silos, and create cross-disciplinary synergies. The mission and structure are unique, but we can learn from other innovative organizations to cultivate the organizational characteristics and culture which will provide the foundation for an innovative DON.

COMFORT WITH RISK AND UNCERTAINTY



Innovation means assuming risk of failure, as the outcome is by nature uncertain. An organizational mindset consumed by driving risk to zero foregoes the opportunity for innovation.

The rich history of innovation in the Naval Services is underscored by the fact that operations are routinely conducted in unpredictable environments. Uncertainty can provide opportunity, both in the battlespace and in the business enterprise. Rear Admiral Raymond Spruance assumed such risk at the Battle of Midway, when committing his force's aircraft to strike Imperial Japanese aircraft carriers. If organizational leaders stifle or neglect creativity and innovation, they unwittingly drive it into the shadows. If this occurs warfighters are denied the benefit of our best thinking, our most creative individuals may leave, and the organization's future preeminence jeopardized.

The commitment of organizational leaders to champion new thinking and thoughtful risk is critical to fostering innovation within the DON. We must provide the freedom, space, time, resources, and organizational support to experiment at every level from everyday training scenarios to large programs of record. We must continue to challenge a zero-defect mentality, make allowances for fast failure, and learn from our fruitless efforts so that in the long term we may have greater success.



SECNAV GUIDANCE:

- Commanders at every level must create an environment which allows for the challenging of assumptions, the creation of novel ideas and strategies, and the support to follow-through and make an impact.
- Commanders at all levels must identify the appropriate conditions for taking risks.
- Prudent risk takers, and the failures which result in learning, must be recognized and rewarded.
- Zero-Defect thinking must not permeate promotion boards or performance assessments. Failure that occurs in a learning environment ultimately benefits the organization.

CULTIVATE INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

The DON has the unique advantage of possessing a motivated workforce inspired by its mission and empowered to pursue innovative solutions. Every Sailor, Marine and civilian employee voluntarily joined the Department. With such advantages, the return on investment is much greater from efforts to improve the strengths of an individual or organization, rather trying to fix weaknesses. An innovative DON aligns organizations and individuals into positions capitalizing on their strengths, allows more freedom of choice, and provides an environment where individuals can develop and pursue passions.



SECNAV GUIDANCE:

- DON leaders and supervisors must acquaint themselves with the professional interests of their workforce and attempt to align those interests with mission requirements, and provide the means by which their talents can be cultivated and best applied.
- All DON personnel should have a means to relay professional interests and developmental goals to community managers. In turn, community managers should consider professional interests in personnel assignments and school selections, to the maximum extent possible.
- DON personnel should be encouraged to learn and grow by developing their professional interests and identifying opportunities to align those interests with organizational missions.



EMPHASIZE INFORMATION SHARING



Innovation thrives on collective brainpower and cross-disciplinary thinking. Our ability to innovate in the future directly depends on leveraging ideas and executing them both vertically and horizontally across the organization. Awareness and accessibility to the vast amount of relevant information within the DON must be universally viewed as a strategic asset. As such, we must prioritize sharing and the removal of cultural barriers so that collaboration occurs freely and the right information enables data-driven decisions.

Historically, the DON has focused on protecting information from outside threats. This view often prohibits sharing knowledge across organizational boundaries. Broader individual awareness enables warfighting, business and technical comparative advantages. We must evolve from the industrial age culture of “need-to-know” to one of “need-to-share.” Doing so will move us towards becoming a true learning organization.



SECNAV GUIDANCE:

- We must recognize and harness the power of our collective intelligence across the DON Enterprise.
- We must invest in virtual collaboration forums which connect innovators across traditional organizational boundaries and promote a culture encouraging information sharing.
- Every command must establish practices to facilitate better information sharing internally and with other DON organizations.

AGILE DECISION-MAKING

Organizational agility is increasingly an information age need. The landscape is littered with once successful institutions which did not move away from bureaucratic management processes, did not embrace sharing information, and did not develop a tolerance for failure. Those organizations no longer exist. We are at a tipping point in history, and the future is inherently uncertain. Relying solely on our traditional, slow moving forms of operational dominance is no longer sufficient.

Many of our bureaucratic processes trace back to the Cold War, an era when stability and preserving a symmetrical balance of power were paramount. While these processes began with good intentions, when rigidly applied they are the antithesis of innovation. In today's environment, these same processes are now a source of competitive disadvantage. With our own decisions mired by endless layers of process, our adversaries, freed from such constraints, are outpacing and outmaneuvering us in the innovation cycle.

As the past decade of combat operations have shown, enlisted Sailors and Marines were empowered to make life or death decisions every day. Similarly, mid-level military officers are entrusted with commanding multi-million dollar warfighting platforms, forward deployed around the globe. The same level of trust, empowerment and agile decision-making needs to spread throughout the naval enterprise and we must work together to streamline bureaucratic processes, remove unnecessary levels of review, and decentralize decision-making to increase agility.



SECNAV GUIDANCE:

- Senior DON Leaders, working with Congress, the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Staff, must re-examine our processes using the lens of innovation to focus on reforming those processes which overvalue risk reduction at the expense of capitalizing on opportunity.
- Leaders within the DON must make a concerted effort to eliminate unnecessary overhead, streamline processes and allow more freedom and flexibility to develop creative and novel solutions to our challenges.
- Organizational leaders must instill a sense of accountability and trust to effectively streamline decision making and avoid unnecessary internal reviews.

DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT



Innovation requires the ability to question norms, synthesize different views, and collaborate to develop unique and powerful solutions. Cognitive diversity is the DNA of innovation. Fully using cognitive diversity inside and outside our organization requires acknowledging the unique traits of individuals, and rethinking who and how we bring people together to collaborate and solve problems. Such cooperation often avoids group-think, a condition which has created past national security failures. Innovation cannot be restricted to stovepipes within the organization and leadership has to be trained to build teams not just using lists of qualifications, but rather through understanding the complexity of thought processes and organizational dynamics.



SECAV GUIDANCE:

- Military and Civilian promotion/selection panels must seek out candidates with diverse well-considered perspectives and break the cycle of monolithic thinking.
- Organizational leaders must ensure diverse groups take part in concept development and decision making.
- Inclusive leadership must be taught at every level in the DON.
- Functional Community managers must identify professional development opportunities to increase the diversity of experience of the workforce.
- Crowdsourcing, in all of its forms, is emerging as a powerful tool in the quest to harness cognitive diversity. Organizational leaders should take every opportunity to examine and use the various methods for crowdsourcing at every phase of their thinking.

MEASURE WHAT MATTERS

Metrics can supply the evidence that forces us to confront our assumptions and change our ways of thinking about accepted realities. This creates a foundation for innovation. During the Battle of the Atlantic in World War II, operations research created usable evidence for operational success against German U-boats. Well-designed metrics supply the fuel for positive change, but too often we measure what is easy to quantify, rather than what is important. An innovative DON ensures that our approach to measurement is thoughtful, comprehensive, and continually-assessed to cultivate and inform innovation.



SECNAV GUIDANCE:

- Incorporate measurements of the five previously described innovation characteristics in the performance plans of Senior Leadership.
- All DON organizations must incorporate the five characteristics of an innovative organization into their performance planning.
- Leadership will share with the SECNAV how they incorporate the five characteristics and the results of measuring them.

