

# MENTORING IN THE U.S. NAVY

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## Experiences and Attitudes of Senior Navy Personnel

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**T**he first operational definition of mentoring in organizations—offered by Kathy Kram in 1985—proposed that mentoring relationships facilitate an individual’s professional development through two distinct categories of “mentoring functions.”<sup>1</sup> Career functions included sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and provision of challenging assignments. Psychosocial functions included role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling,

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and friendship. Considerable empirical evidence tends to support the importance of both career and psychosocial components to good mentorship.<sup>2</sup> Mentorships in any organizational environment tend to share the following characteristics: positive emotional valence, increasing mutuality, a range of career and psychosocial functions, an intentional focus on the development of the mentee’s career and professional identity, and a generative interest on the part of the mentor in passing along a professional legacy.<sup>3</sup> Excellent mentors are intentional about the mentor role. They select mentees thoughtfully, invest significant time and energy getting to know their mentees, and deliberately offer the career and support functions most relevant to their mentees’ unique developmental needs.<sup>4</sup>

Deliberate mentorship features prominently in the Navy’s recently released Leader Development Strategy, a common framework for leader

development Navy-wide.<sup>5</sup> The strategy recognizes that people constitute the Navy's most valuable strategic asset and that deliberate development of individual sailors and officers must become a top priority. Although mentoring is infused throughout the four core elements of the strategy (experience, education, training, and personal development), it is most explicit in the fourth element: "Personal development . . . includes performance evaluation, coaching, counseling, and mentoring."<sup>6</sup> The architects of this Leader Development Strategy make it clear that effective mentor-leaders focus attention on the individual development of junior personnel.

In a 2010 article in the *Naval War College Review*, we summarized the empirical evidence lending strong support to the benefits of mentoring relationships for junior persons fortunate enough to experience them in any organizational context.<sup>7</sup> An updated review confirms that mentoring matters. Hundreds of rigorous studies, meta-analyses, and other quantitative reviews make it clear that those who report having been mentored accrue a number of reliable benefits in comparison with those not mentored.<sup>8</sup> Across disciplines and organizations, mentoring is consistently associated with greater work satisfaction and performance, higher retention, better physical health and self-esteem, positive work relationships, stronger organizational commitment, career motivation, professional competence, and career recognition and success.<sup>9</sup>

Mentoring in the military is no exception.<sup>10</sup> The few existing studies on the prevalence and efficacy of mentorship among active-duty personnel reveal that having a mentor while in uniform tends to bolster satisfaction with one's military career, provides a range of important career and psychosocial advantages, and heightens the probability that mentored service members will in turn mentor others themselves. In spite of these findings, the term "mentoring" tends to evoke a range of reactions among service members today. There are many factors at play here. These include miscommunications caused by conflicting definitions of mentoring, formal mentoring programs that are sometimes perceived as onerous administrative burdens (versus culturally accepted and integrated mechanisms for developing junior personnel), and lingering perceptions among some that mentoring connotes favoritism and unfair advantage.<sup>11</sup> There is also some evidence that although military personnel want and value mentorships, they resist any program that attempts to legislate or formalize relationships.<sup>12</sup>

It is easy to appreciate the Navy's quandary with regard to formal mentoring programs. On one hand, there is considerable evidence that *informal mentorships* (those that emerge naturally through mutual initiation and ongoing interaction, free of external intervention or planning) result in stronger outcomes for mentees than are found for mentees *formally assigned* to mentors.<sup>13</sup> In most organizational contexts, both mentors and mentees appear to seek out mentorship matches on

the basis of similarities, shared interests, and frequent positive interactions. Two scholars in this field, Belle Ragins and John Cotton, have nicely described the sometimes-unconscious process at work in senior personnel as they gravitate toward junior members of the organization: “Informal mentoring relationships develop on the basis of mutual identification and the fulfillment of career needs. Mentors select protégés who are viewed as younger versions of themselves, and the relationship provides mentors with a sense of generativity or contribution to future generations.”<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, there appear to be problems associated with compelling people to participate in mentorships. In light of the well-documented success of informal mentoring in the business world, many organizations—including the U.S. military—have moved to formalize the process. Planned and instigated by organizations, formal mentoring programs involve some process for matching or assigning dyads as well as some level of subsequent oversight and evaluation.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to informal mentorships, formalized relationships tend to be somewhat less emotionally intense, more visible within the organization, focused on specific developmental goals, and confined to predetermined periods of time.<sup>16</sup>

From these findings, it is easy to conclude that organizations should let nature take its course when it comes to mentoring, hoping that enough informal mentorships will evolve to meet the needs of junior personnel. But here is the rub: when an organization relies exclusively on chemistry and the informal connections that may develop between junior and senior personnel, fewer mentorships develop. That is, organizations that create some structure for facilitating mentor-mentee matches have more junior members of the community getting mentored. Of course, the best structure for a specific organization may not include a broad mandatory program; at times, voluntary programs and initiatives to stimulate and reward good mentoring are the best fit.

In an earlier article, we highlighted several lingering questions about mentoring in the military. One of these is the question of the perceived value of both mentoring generally and formalized mentoring programs specifically among leaders in the fleet. Although the recent Leader Development Strategy indicates attention to mentorship at the highest levels of Navy leadership, we wondered how “deck plate” officers and senior enlisted perceive mentoring in the Navy.<sup>17</sup>

## THE NAVAL WAR COLLEGE MENTORING STUDY

In light of the relatively sparse evidence illuminating mentoring in the U.S. Navy, and in an effort to assess the attitudes of officers and senior enlisted regarding formal mentoring programs, we conducted a multimethod study of mentoring among 149 Navy personnel attending senior leadership courses at the Naval War College (fifty-five officers, ninety-four senior enlisted). All study participants consented to taking part. Participants were enrolled, variously, in four

professional development courses: the Command Master Chief / Chief of the Boat Course (CMC/COB,  $n = 9$ ); the Senior Enlisted Academy course (SEA,  $n = 85$ ); Command Leadership School (CLS,  $n = 32$ ); or the Maritime Staff Operators Course (MSOC,  $n = 23$ ). Participants responded to a brief, four-page survey requesting demographic data, experience relative to mentoring in the fleet, and perspectives on mentoring programs in the Navy. A smaller sample of participants was randomly selected for participation in four course-specific focus groups on the topic of mentoring in the Navy.

Among the 149 participants, twelve were women. The mean age was forty years, and the average length of naval service was twenty years. Self-reported ethnicities were 110 white (75.3 percent), nineteen black (13 percent), ten Hispanic (6.8 percent), and five Native American / Pacific Islander (3.4 percent). Eighty-five percent of enlisted participants were either E-8 or E-9 (that is, senior chief or master chief petty officer), while 89 percent of officers were of the pay grades O-4 to O-6 (lieutenant commander to captain). Using a five-point scale (1 = Extremely Dissatisfied, 5 = Extremely Satisfied), we asked the participants to rate their overall level of satisfaction with their Navy careers. The mean satisfaction rating was 4.6 (enlisted = 4.7, officer = 4.5).

A full 91 percent of our sample reported having had at least one significant mentor during their Navy careers (enlisted = 94.7 percent, officer = 85.5 percent). On average, participants reported 3.5 important mentors during their naval careers. By and large, mentors had been men (95 percent) and in nearly all cases had been older than participants (91.2 percent), by an average of nine years. Ninety-three percent of mentors had been senior naval officers, and a full 81 percent had been in participants' chains of command. Strikingly, a full 55 percent of officer participants reported that their primary mentors had been their commanding officers; this was true for only 1.2 percent of enlisted participants. On average, participants reported that their primary mentorships in the Navy had lasted for 4.7 years.

One section of the survey inquired about who had initiated the mentorship, followed by a narrative question asking those participants who had had primary mentors to "describe how the mentor relationship began." On the issue of relationship initiation, most indicated that the relationship had been initiated by the mentors (49.3 percent). Representative narrative responses include the following: "My mentor identified me as someone with potential and engaged in providing me advice and counseling. Once initiated, I felt comfortable seeking advice as I faced challenges"; "He asked me about my goals, gave me direction on a daily basis, let me know my strengths and weaknesses"; "My mentor took an interest in me. He saw potential and helped me to see it"; and "I was required to return to a different career field and this person took an interest in me. He

formally trained me, took ownership, and followed up with calls and emails on a regular basis.”

In other cases, the relationship was mutually initiated (32.8 percent): “Ours was a senior/subordinate relationship involving mutual interests, career and personal goals”; and “I was the Captain’s aide and after a few weeks in that capacity, a mentorship developed. I still seek his advice 6 years after that job ended.”

In a smaller proportion of cases, mentorships were initiated primarily by the mentee (14.2 percent): “I recognized this person as an example of what I wanted to become. He displayed my goals. All I had to do at that point was ask him to be my mentor”; “I asked for guidance on how to broaden my horizons. I kept going to him when I no longer felt challenged and needed something new”; and “I sought him out through informal talking and asking selection board questions.”

Only 3.7 percent of our participants indicated that the mentor-mentee match had been formed in the context of a formal mentoring program. These findings suggest that in 82 percent of all mentorships reported by participants, the relationships had been initiated primarily as a result of the mentors’ interest in and attention to the mentees.

We asked our participants to rate their level of agreement (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) with the proposition that several specific mentoring functions had been evident in their primary mentorships. We list the functions in the table by strength of participant endorsement:

Mentor Function	Mean
Advocated on my behalf	4.57
Developed my military skills	4.55
Enhanced my military career development	4.46
Offered me acceptance, support, and encouragement	4.45
Provided direct training or instruction	4.17
Increased my self-esteem	4.15
Increased my visibility/exposure within the Navy	4.14
Enhanced my creativity and problem-solving skills	3.96
Developed my personal ethics and professional values	3.83
Provided emotional support/counseling	3.82
Assisted in establishing professional networks	3.77
Served to protect me	3.64
Provided me opportunities (choice assignments)	3.50
Helped me bypass bureaucracy	3.03

These results indicate that excellent mentors in the fleet are active and deliberate in the roles of advocate, teacher/trainer, and career adviser. Moreover, mentors are consistently viewed as providing the personal acceptance, support, and encouragement that bolster the professional self-esteem of mentees. The fact that helping mentees bypass bureaucracy or obtain choice assignments are the mentor functions least frequently endorsed suggests that the perception of mentoring as mere favoritism, creating unfair privilege for a few, is not prevalent in the Navy.

To amplify further the behaviors of effective mentors, we asked mentored participants to respond to the following question: "Please describe an *event* or *experience* from the mentoring relationship which best illustrates how you benefited from being mentored." Responses fell into several consistent categories, including imparting wisdom/perspective, career advocacy / exposure / challenge, personal counsel, support during adversity, and provision of a model/exemplar.

Responses illustrating the value of a mentor imparting wisdom in the form of a long-term view of one's naval career included these: "My mentor helped me learn to think strategically regarding the development of my career. She guided me into a course of instruction to help ensure future success in the Navy"; "My mentor gave me a glimpse of the road or path that I needed to take to achieve my personal and professional goals"; "He discussed a future job that I was not interested in but my community had offered me. His long term view helped direct my course"; "My mentor took an active role in ensuring that I chose a follow-on assignment that was conducive to career development"; and "He assisted me by guiding me to college and definitely changed my decision-making process."

One of the most prevalent response categories highlighted the value of mentor advocacy, exposure, and challenge: "I didn't fully understand what I was capable of. My mentor assigned me to a job that was out of my area of expertise and challenged me to get out of my comfort zone. Through this experience I learned another critical component of my duties and it made me an expert outside my field—I still have that confidence to tackle the jobs that I haven't already mastered"; "My mentor gave me a chance to demonstrate what I could do, then put his money where his mouth was by writing a strong recommendation letter to the screening board that got me selected"; "He pushed me to take challenging job assignments. Some of the assignments were given to me without me having to ask for them"; "He recognized my abilities, pushed for recognition of my achievements and was instrumental in getting me the jobs I needed for career progression"; "Multiple times, when a high visibility problem came up, he would pick me to go with him to fix it. The amount of experience and recognition he provided is unmeasurable"; and "My mentor exposed me to a network of senior leaders and encouraged me to pursue more senior positions and get out of my normal comfort zone."

Personal counseling and support constituted a third category of participants' reflection regarding their mentors' most salient mentoring behaviors: "I had a hard time adjusting to the Navy because I had been discriminated against on a constant basis. He showed me how to adapt"; "My mentor spent numerous hours guiding me on handling personal issues, keeping perspective, and problem-solving work relationship issues"; "She offered me acceptance, support, and encouragement"; "When I was going through a personal crisis about my career, he took the time to listen and give me honest and thorough advice"; "He was there for me personally when I went through a tough divorce"; "He has a way of helping me work through an issue and eventually lead me to the answers I already had for myself"; and "My mentor taught me to control my emotions and self-reflect to be more aware of my surroundings and how to be a professional."

Related to personal counsel was a category of responses specifically reflecting on the value of the mentor's support and encouragement during moments of great professional difficulty: "I was passed over for promotion. Interaction with my mentor provided the support and recommendations needed to improve my chances for the next look, resulting in promotion"; and "When I wasn't selected for O-5, my mentor provided the coaching and visibility needed to successfully select in the next cycle."

A final category of participants' responses to our query about salient examples of their mentors' behavior in the mentoring role had to do with the value of a powerful role model and professional exemplar: "My mentor (the CO [commanding officer]) led by example. His work ethic and leadership were worthy of emulation"; "He used his prior mistakes and experiences to give me food for thought"; "I had the opportunity to accompany this officer as part of a small team conducting an investigation, during which I had an opportunity to observe and learn about his approach to leadership, ethics, and professionalism in a very concentrated manner"; "He taught me how to be a better sailor, I wanted to emulate him"; and "I was always yelling at subordinates. He sat me down and told me how to treat people, but more than that, he showed me by his example."

When we asked our officers and senior enlisted personnel to provide overall assessments of how important their primary mentor relationships had been to them both professionally and personally, the results were striking. Using the same five-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree), mean ratings for professionally important (4.7) and personally important (4.4) were quite high and similar for officers and enlisted. Moreover, our participants strongly endorsed the value of mentoring for the Navy. When asked, "Overall, how important is effective mentoring to the development of future Navy leaders?" (1 = Not Important, 5 = Extremely Important), the mean rating for enlisted was 4.8 and for officers, 4.5.

We also asked our participants whether they had served as mentors to junior members of the naval service. A full 95 percent indicated they had mentored, on average, twenty individual mentees during their naval careers.

A final item included on our survey was this: “Many Navy commands now have formal mentor-protégé matching programs. In your experience, how successful are these programs?” On a five-point scale ranging from 1 (Not Successful) to 5 (Extremely Successful), the mean rating was 2.5 (enlisted = 2.33, officer = 2.8), indicating that formal matching efforts tended to be viewed as somewhat unsuccessful. The survey then solicited narrative responses regarding why formal mentoring programs should or should not be incorporated into the Navy’s plan for the development and training of future leaders. Among officers, twenty-eight of fifty-two narrative responses were negative regarding the value of formal programs, while thirteen responses were positive; the rest were neutral in valence. Among enlisted participants, fifty-four of eighty-six narrative responses were negative, fifteen were positive, and the remainder were neutral. In light of the similarity of the comments, we combined the groups in the following categorization of narrative themes. Among the comparatively small number of positive comments, the following themes were salient.

***Mentoring Prevents Junior Personnel from Getting Overlooked.*** “There are a lot of lost sailors, too many of them fall through the cracks because they did not get the proper mentoring”; “With today’s new recruits, they need to have the guidance to ensure they are directed in their careers; Sailors need a ‘sea daddy’ to keep them on track and let them know when they have gone off it!”; and “Formal programs are especially useful for junior enlisted personnel who might otherwise be overlooked or forgotten.”

***Mentoring Is Critical for Career Development.*** “A formal program could ensure that others receive the same benefit that I received, I can honestly say that I would not be where I am today without the mentorship I received”; “These programs help sailors understand the long-term consequences of actions and inactions”; and “Formal programs will mostly help convince those who would not ordinarily seek out mentoring that they can benefit from it. A mentor can teach a sailor from his/her experiences therefore eliminating the trial and error aspect, allowing fewer mistakes and more efficient learning.”

***Formal Programs Hold Leaders Accountable.*** “I think formal programs should be incorporated because it will hold senior leaders accountable for actions or lack thereof”; “Formal programs are necessary to jump start mentoring throughout the various Navy communities”; “It is probably good to have formal programs, but if leaders were doing their jobs well, mentoring would be inherent in the

current process”; and “This should be force fed because some people won’t take care of their sailors.”

*Mentoring Is Crucial for Retention.* “One word, ‘retention!’”; “These programs offer a sound basis for developing better sailors for the future of the Navy”; “In order for us to maintain, sustain, and continue to be the best, we must invest wisely in our future”; and “Mentorship is important for development of future leaders.”

The majority of narrative comments expressed strong concern about the rationale, utility, and long-term value of formally assigned mentorships. As in the case of the positive themes, we identified four salient negative themes in participants’ responses. We list the four themes below with a representative sample of participant comments.

*Not All Senior Personnel Make Effective Mentors.* “Quite frankly, some people should not be mentors and to force them into a mentorship is absolutely ludicrous”; “Formal programs would force officers unsuited for mentorship into that job”; “Mentoring programs are promising but not everyone is qualified to be a mentor”; and “Not everyone is or could be a mentor and they should be identified through a vetting process. Formal programs will make people mentors who do not even care. Assigning the wrong person deters sailors from seeking good mentoring matches in the future.”

*Forcing Matches Undermines the Value of Mentoring.* “A formal program is not required, if people aren’t inclined to mentor on their own, the value of the mentorship won’t be that high”; “The chain of command—when functioning properly—already provides formal mentoring”; “Like a forced marriage (formal) versus a traditional marriage (couple decides)”; “To force something on someone is rarely effective”; “You cannot fabricate a relationship between two people”; “If you make it an instruction, it loses the spirit and value of old fashioned mentoring”; “Forcing mentorship in any organization will result in poor quality”; and “Mentorship should be encouraged by leadership, initiated by seniors, but never forced on juniors. Some individuals do not want and will not benefit from a formal program.”

*Quality Mentoring Hinges on the Perception of Choice.* “A mentor chooses you or you choose a mentor, if you assign them you end up with pairs that have nothing in common or don’t even like each other”; “I should choose who I want to emulate, don’t choose for me!”; “Formal programs fail because it is difficult to match mentors and protégés of similar mind and temperament—often the relationship is more meaningful and lasts longer if they find each other naturally”; “Nothing beats finding a mentor you connect with personally”; “If there is a specific formula that successfully promotes mentoring, I don’t think it has been discovered

—mentoring involves chemistry, not a formal assignment”; and “A mentor needs to be someone a particular sailor looks up to, respects, and admires.”

*Formalizing Mentorship Creates an Onerous Administrative Burden.* “Formal programs translate into more busy work without achieving the goal”; “I believe formal programs are disingenuous and often only a paper chase”; “A formal program would add an administrative burden and create a ‘not my job’ scenario because some senior people would then have the excuse, ‘I’m not his assigned mentor’ and blow off their jobs as leaders, educators, and mentors”; “This program will be a paper tiger”; “Just because it’s on paper doesn’t mean that real mentoring is occurring”; “I am skeptical of a big Navy program to enforce something as personal as mentoring”; “Formal program = check-in-the-box mentality”; “Now, the program will be inspected during inspection visits and lead to gundecking [falsifying results]”; and “Two words—paper drill.”

To understand more fully the experiences of participants with formal mentoring programs in the Navy, we conducted four focus groups with volunteers from the four leadership training courses mentioned earlier. Focus groups ranged in size from eight to twenty-three, and the duration of sessions ranged from forty minutes to one hour. The primary question posed to each group was: “Are formal mentoring programs (programs that involve matching mentors with mentees) a good idea for the Navy? Why or why not?” In most cases, our participants reflected on this question through the prisms of their own experiences with formal mentoring programs in the fleet. One member of the interview team took verbatim notes of the interviews. Participant responses were later grouped according to theme. Once again, negative comments tended to outnumber by far comments affirming a formal program.

On the positive side, focus-group participants emphasized that they highly value the concept of mentorship (“The concept of mentoring is as popular and patriotic as motherhood and apple pie. Everyone likes it and understands in a fundamental way what it is”) and many believed that the Navy already has a culture that values mentorship (“We already do have some culture of mentoring . . . why not just improve that culture without coming up with an instruction?”). Some recommended that merely reinforcing excellent mentoring might be preferable to legislating it (“Drive it into the culture by rewarding and reinforcing it. Mention it on the fitrep [fitness report], ‘is a good mentor.’ Reemphasize it at various training and education waypoints along the way in one’s career”). Several were adamant that mentorship should be nested under the umbrella of leadership and the general leadership expectations of all officers and senior enlisted personnel. (“Chiefs have been mentoring for years—it’s leadership, not mentoring. When you make mentoring management and not leadership, you have

problems”; “Mentoring is good, but mandatory mentoring is a crutch for commands with weak cultures of development”; “In my last command, we scrapped the formal mentorship program and made it the responsibility of the chiefs and division officers to get the deck plate leadership done”).

Finally, there was a perception by a few participants that formal mentoring programs were intended specifically for minority-group sailors: “The proposed instruction makes it sound like we should focus on minority groups, which suggests that this is another equal opportunity program”; and “This is never clearly addressed by any instruction but there is a strong implication that you should be mentoring minority sailors or women to enhance diversity.”

The majority of our focus-group participants acknowledged that any formalized mentoring program is likely to meet with resistance (“As soon as you say ‘mentoring’ you get a big sigh and resistance”; “If the Navy program is purely programmatic, not authentic, and if you force pairings, that is a recipe for disaster”; “Don’t create something that 95% of leadership disagrees with!”; “Nobody thinks mentoring should be formalized”). They further emphasized that any formal program is quickly perceived as onerous in the fleet (“When folks in the fleet hear they are going to be held accountable for mentoring then it gets oppressive and people don’t do it for the right reasons”; “Oh gee whiz, another program, another three-ring binder, another report to generate that someone may or may not read”; “I was mentorship coordinator on a carrier, we had an actual form that both [mentor and mentee] had to sign that included the date and time we met each week. Nobody liked the mechanistic, mandatory aspect”).

As in the narrative survey responses, our focus-group participants were cognizant of the problem inherent in the assumption that anyone can mentor effectively (“Some make good mentors and some don’t have what it takes to be effective in this role. It’s the same with selecting sponsors in a command. You want your best reps to do that. We need to do the same with mentors, pick your very best people and put them in the mentor role”; “I’m sorry, but there are some folks I don’t want talking to our junior guys”). Several indicated that mentor training should be a paramount concern (“Lack of training for mentors is a real problem. People need to be prepared for mentoring, this is a barrier to effectiveness”; “We don’t understand the complexity of mentorship. We don’t take time to train people”). One area in which training deficits created problems was failure to balance one’s mentoring and gatekeeping or enforcement roles with mentees appropriately (“These programs can undermine trust when a ‘mentor’ reports significant concerns about a mentee up the chain of command. In my command, this resulted in separation from the Navy for one sailor”). Balancing multiple roles with mentees may require a specific skill set and training for competence in the mentor role.

Focus-group participants also identified the need for “big Navy” flexibility and tolerance for the unique incarnations of mentoring programs in specific communities: “The cookie-cutter approach won’t work with the different communities and ranks. Tailor the program so that each command can use its structure and strengths”; “The question is how can various commands go about mentoring informally so that everyone has the opportunity for mentoring.”

A final theme had to do with concerns about assessing mentoring in the fleet. Some participants were concerned that the “need” for mentoring programs had not been established (“Why are we doing this? Is it really needed? Did anyone check to find out how much mentoring is going on without a formal program?”). Others noted the difficulty inherent in evaluating unique outcomes associated with mentoring programs (“Mentoring outcomes are hard to measure. Many things contribute to success, mentoring is just one element”).

### INTENTIONAL AND PROACTIVE MENTORS

This is the first empirical snapshot of mentoring in the U.S. Navy since the proliferation of compulsory matching programs nearly a decade ago. Within our sample of senior enlisted and midgrade officers, 91 percent reported having had at least one significant mentor during their careers in the Navy. On average, participants reported three significant mentorships. These numbers are consistent with data from retired flag officers.<sup>18</sup> As in previous studies of mentoring in the Navy, participants in our study reported that their primary mentors had been crucial for them both personally and professionally; they overwhelmingly endorsed quality mentoring as of critical importance for the future of the Navy. A full 95 percent of our participants were already active mentors themselves, counting on average twenty mentees during their careers thus far.

In the vast majority of mentor relationships, the mentor himself or herself had been instrumental in initiating the relationship. In approximately half of cases, the mentor had been the primary initiator, while an additional one-third of relationships had resulted from mutual interest and initiation. The fact that senior enlisted and commissioned mentors had been instrumental in launching 82 percent of the mentoring relationships reported by our participants is striking. With only 3.7 percent of mentorships born of formal mentoring programs, these data suggest that Navy leaders are intentional and proactive when it comes to reaching out to junior personnel and instigating meaningful mentoring relationships. It is particularly noteworthy that more than half of the officers in our sample reported that their own commanding officers had become their most significant career mentors.

What do effective mentors “do”? Participants in this study reported that strong advocacy, direct instruction and development of military skills, career guidance,

acceptance, support, and encouragement all loomed large among the most important mentor functions. Reports of salient mentoring experiences confirmed these ratings. Participants recalled examples illustrating the value of imparting real-world wisdom, career advocacy, exposure and visibility within the community, personal counsel, challenge, and deliberate role modeling. In contrast, our mentees were least likely to report that protection, help in bypassing the normal channels, or preference for choice assignments had been important elements of the mentorship. This evidence seems to refute concerns that mentoring is equated with special privilege and unfair advantage in the military.<sup>19</sup>

The most important contribution of this study was a multimethod exploration of participants' perceptions of the value of formalized mentoring programs in the fleet. Overall, both officers and senior enlisted participants were between neutral and somewhat negative in their assessments of formal mentor-mentee programs—particularly those that are mandatory. Both survey and focus-group responses consistently raised concerns about the practice of requiring all senior personnel to mentor. Experience suggests that not everyone has the interpersonal and technical competence to serve effectively in the mentor role. Moreover, our participants expressed concern that marginal or incompetent mentorship may do more harm than good. Forcing sailors to participate in assigned mentorships—particularly in the absence of a thoughtful and participatory matching process—was seen as quite misguided. Because perceptions of choice loom large in determining whether any relationship is likely to succeed, participants were concerned about haphazard or superficial approaches to the pairing of mentors and mentees. Finally, study participants were loud and clear in their objections to any directive that burdened commands with yet another paper chase to be scrutinized during inspections. As others have warned, mandatory formal programs run the risk of undermining the joy and motivation associated with giving to the next generation, through the art of mentorship.<sup>20</sup>

On the basis of the foregoing results, we offer the following recommendations for consideration by Navy leaders. First, it is imperative that the Navy fully implement its Leader Development Strategy, specifically core element number four, personal development. This element focuses attention on individual strengths and weaknesses, personal reflection, evaluation, and growth in the context of competent coaching and mentoring relationships with senior personnel. Judging from the results of this study, mentoring is already taking place in the fleet for many officers and enlisted personnel, and our sample rated mentoring as exceptionally important for the future of the Navy. The challenge in the future will be to increase attention to mentoring as a salient leader competence.

Second, we recommend that local commanding officers approach formal mentoring programs thoughtfully, always with attention to the desired outcomes

and structures that best align with the current command culture. In our previous explorations of mentorship in the military, we have cautioned against programs for programs' sakes and instead have encouraged leaders to enhance the culture of mentoring and the preparedness and commitment of personnel to mentor.<sup>21</sup> So, rather than formal programs with mandatory matching of mentors and protégés, leaders might explore voluntary traditional one-to-one matching programs, “team mentoring” structures in which a “master mentor” meets routinely with a small cohort of protégés, and “mentoring constellations” in which personnel are coached and mentored to create effective networks of career helpers—both inside and external to the command. The key is that some vision for what mentoring can and should achieve drive the development of a mentoring structure.

Third, members of our sample were quite clear in their assessment that not all senior Navy personnel are likely to be effective in the mentor role. This finding highlights the critical importance of preparation and training in the art and science of mentoring as Navy personnel progress through the leader pipeline. Because not all service members have positive mentor role models, and because relationship skills do not come easily for some, leaders must provide consistent and high-quality training for mentorship and, when formal mentoring programs exist, thoughtfully recruit master mentors with track records of excellence in the mentor role.

Finally, it is imperative that the Navy find ways to highlight and reinforce mentoring so that it is perceived as a crucial and valued leader activity. Such reinforcement should include ongoing attention to mentorship in communications from top leaders, local commanders, and warfare communities. Reinforcement strategies might also incorporate fleet-wide mentoring awards and the development of special designations (“master mentor”) to recognize specialized training and exceptional performance in this role.

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#### NOTES

1. Kathy E. Kram, *Mentoring at Work: Developmental Relationships in Organizational Life* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman, 1985).
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3. See W. Brad Johnson, “Mentoring in Psychology Education and Training: A Mentoring Relationship Continuum Model,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Education and Training in Professional Psychology*, ed. W. B. Johnson and N. E. Kaslow (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), pp. 272–90.
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