Modernization and the Surface Subculture

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During a recent visit by the Commandant to our parent Sector, I had the opportunity to engage with him in general conversation about different aspects of the Coast Guard. We discussed the outlook of modernization and many of the dynamics and cultural changes that must take place to achieve full realization of the initiative. I was afforded the opportunity to expound upon the topic relevant to the area most familiar to me, the surface community. The following is my submission:

I feel very fortunate to have arrived in a Coast Guard, already steeped in a tradition of excellence, at a time of transition that can accurately be described as "revolutionary." The modernization of the Coast Guard business model, upon fruition, promises a service comprised of equal parts capability, effectiveness, and readiness. This is to be achieved in part through standardization of platforms and processes, installment of dynamic logistics infrastructure, and judicious balancing of integration versus specialization. As with any change in organizational culture, the primary motive force for that change to take place is "buy-in." The myriad subcultures that are the Coast Guard internalize the ambition of modernization in their own unique ways and in turn the individuals of each subculture make the decision, consciously or otherwise, whether or not to adopt the cultural change in mindset to enable it to work. Basic reason allows us as a service to agree that the goal of modernization is desirable in theory at the very least. I assert that in the Coast Guard subculture that is the surface community, there exist behavioral vestiges that prevent buy-in from taking hold by fostering an atmosphere of resistance to action and resistance to change.

Semper Paratus - - Always Ready. The organizational DNA of our service in two words. Our most noble and altruistic trait is our uncanny ability to surmount seemingly impossible problem sets under even the most adverse conditions. At every accession point this mentality is reinforced in the minds of our prospective officers and enlisted team members through indoctrination and discipline designed to produce a pattern of behavior where triumph, ingenuity, and heroism are virtues. Naturally, this is a good thing! It's what most of us were taught from childhood. It is, at varying degrees, intrinsic to most that choose a career in our service. While the motivation remains intrinsic, the fervor with which we pursue these virtues is driven through accolades, and to a larger degree in the surface subculture, the rewards of earned responsibility through overall excellence of performance. This is also a good thing! Striving for excellence breeds an atmosphere of continual improvement. Leaders get better, people get better, everyone wins. Striving for excellence in my own profession as a cutterman earned me the reward and opportunity to pursue the intrinsic virtues on a grander scale with greater responsibility, and in turn even greater opportunity. Command of operations afloat or ashore are the pinnacles of the surface culture. For those of us fortunate to achieve command, it is the perceived threat of losing such a great opportunity or dread of being relegated to the doldrums of those seemingly destined not to achieve it again that sow the seeds of a sub-cultural resistance to action and resistance to change. It is this expectation of all around general excellence in command responsibility, combined with broadly defined (or culturally assumed) levels of accountability that may not be reasonable.

In the surface subculture, scope of responsibility and scope of accountability are often assumed to overlap in every case. The truth derived from reason dictates that this

cannot be the case. Just as our eyes aren't called to accountability for everything they gaze upon, a Commanding Officer/Officer in Charge logically should not be called to accountability for the reasonably unforeseeable, in spite of possessing a vast scope of responsibility. As logical as this may seem, more often than not there is little to distinguish between scope of responsibility and accountability in the surface subculture as exemplified in the following quote:

> "When I am in charge of a vessel, I always command; nobody commands but me. I take all the responsibility, all the risks, all the hardships that my office would call upon me to take...."
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> - Captain Michael Healy, USRCS, 1896

Accepting this, it stands to reason that when a operational casualty occurs in the surface community that the first question pursued is not "Why did this casualty occur?" but rather "Who's at fault for the casualty?" and "What did or didn't someone do to cause/prevent the casualty?" Conversely, the aviation subculture for instance is built upon an infrastructure that clearly pre-defines responsibility and employs heuristic problem-solving to identify causative factors prior to deciding what entity is held accountable for prevention or correction of a particular casualty. Aircraft Commanders, for example, have a well defined responsibility for the aircraft and the crew under their charge. If an aircraft suffers an in-flight emergency and is forced to land during a mission, responsibility for the identification and safe negotiation of the casualty rests with the Aircraft Commander. Once the casualty is identified, the cause is identified via logical back-tracking to the point of process failure. It is only after this process is complete that

accountability is determined. Scheduling and logistics remain externally negotiated issues.

A structured and intellectually mature decision-making model is the only approach that fits within a modernized infrastructure. The capacity of each individual to mentally resign themselves to solution-based problem solving vice fault finding is the linchpin of an operational and logistical infrastructure because this determines trust and quality of interaction within the system. The glaring difference between the methodologies of the aviation and surface subcultures is not the importance of responsibility and accountability but instead that the latter fosters an atmosphere where fault is assigned in advance of facts. This further produces a cultural dynamic of avoiding fault at the expense of facts. It is because surface commanding officers/Officer in Charges must fear even unpredictable problems/casualties solely due to threat of potentially diminishing their command opportunity that an unbiased problem-solving approach is rarely employed. Small problems tend to get overlooked, "quick-fixed," or go unreported until they compound into large problems. Hypothetically, if an aircraft engine has a leaking fuel line, operations are stopped until the fuel line is repaired. If a cutter/smallboat engine has a leaking fuel line the commander responsible is expected to keep the vessel safe but "operational." For the surface commander to stop operations intuitively draws the ire of surface operational planners and supporters. These entities demand the commander's immediate accountability for why the casualty took place, what was done to prevent it, what is being done to fix it, and often question whether the commander made the correct decisions. This is all before anyone has addressed why the problem occurred.

The reason the aviation subculture's methodology remains effective is due to three main dynamics in that subculture. First, as mentioned, the scope of an aircraft commander's responsibility is defined beyond any subjective interpretation. As a byproduct, divergences and convergences between scope of responsibility and scope of accountability are equally well defined. Second, there is a cultural acceptance of risk in immediate loss of operational effectiveness in favor of long term gain. Third, operational statistics are not inexorably linked as a determining factor of command effectiveness or success. Every one of these three dynamics is made possible by the buy-in of the aviation subculture at large. This is representative of a belief that not only the system in place works, but that it will work for the user and vice versa. The converse example in the surface subculture is the turn-in and re-supply of depot maintained parts. The system is in place to provide these parts to the units as needed and in a timely fashion. Many units still horde these parts in fear that the system will fail in a time of extreme need. Thus fear of diminishing mission effectiveness serves to reduce the effectiveness of the support process. It is these negative dynamics in the surface subculture that undermine the environment of trust that is needed for the modernized system to operate properly.

In the surface subculture it is the reticence by commanding officers/Officer in Charges to make necessary decisions that may unavoidably detract from operations that amounts to a sub-cultural resistance to action. It is the reticence by those commands to entrust their fate to the installed support infrastructure for fear of detracting from operations that amounts to a sub-cultural resistance to change. The modernized Coast Guard business model depends upon buy-in into the seamless integration of process, infrastructure, knowledge, and ability. If the surface subculture cannot resign itself to

trust installed processes, employ and enforce the decision-making models that work within a robust infrastructure, and foster and nurture an environment that errs on the side of command knowledge and ability, then it will be very difficult for the motive force for cultural change to come into being. The change in the infrastructure and processes is already well underway. All that is needed for the surface subculture to embrace a painless realization of the ambition of modernization is a change in mentality from the top down. Define scopes of responsibility. Place facts before fault. Do these, trust and effectiveness will reciprocate through the system. There are already several examples to follow. The aviation community is just one of these.