Headwinds Battering the Navy

Paul Grossgold
Ritch Eich

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl

Part of the Business Commons

This Case Study is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Business at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Values-Based Leadership by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.
Case Study

Headwinds Battering the Navy

— Paul Grossgold and Ritch Eich

It’s no secret that China’s People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has made significant investments in its maritime forces. In fact, it has achieved a numerical superiority in numbers of warships and has an industrial capacity that far exceeds that of the United States. While the U.S. Navy enjoys a supposed technological advantage, there is no guarantee that will hold over time.

The question must be asked, therefore, whether the U.S. Navy is on the right trajectory to retain, or even extend, warfighting advantages. Realistically, the answer is no. In fact, current U.S. Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro said recently that the U.S. cannot keep up with China’s shipbuilding. He said China could soon field 400 ships. The U.S. currently has fewer than 300.

If this is truly the case, then what should the U.S. Navy do now to reverse course? This article will focus on the challenges faced by the Navy in the area of personnel, with a particular focus on recruiting.

The Navy clearly faces headwinds, both externally and from within the lifelines. Let’s start with the self-inflicted wounds. In recent years the Navy has made a number of crippling and embarrassing missteps. Collisions at sea; new ships that don’t work; corruption scandals; sexual assaults; suicides; environmental disasters; and allegations of racism serve as examples.

All different in nature, these incidents and issues point to major lapses in leadership. While the Navy contends it invests in leadership training at both the officer and enlisted levels, it’s fair to question if the training curricula in place is appropriately structured and is addressing
the right issues. Are we practicing and thereby teaching leadership from a mere academic perspective or are we teaching leadership from the deck plate (where officers and senior petty officers connect with their sailors, know the mission, and lead by example)?

The comparative quality of American sailors over those of any potential enemy is undeniable. Maintaining that advantage, however, can never be taken for granted. Threatening that dynamic, the sea service faces its greatest recruiting challenge in years. The Navy is not alone in this, and leadership says it is stepping up to address it. If so, success depends on a full court press rather than a piecemeal approach. Leadership must establish a real sense of urgency so that a new course can be made in time.

There are numerous obstacles to solving the recruiting shortfalls.

Several rocky shoals lie ahead, including:

- Competition is fierce. The Navy not only competes with the other services and law enforcement departments nationwide from the same pool of potential recruits, but also with corporate headhunters who entice job seekers with compensation packages that the Navy simply cannot match.
- Trust in the military is declining. To wit, a public opinion poll released last year by the Ronald Reagan Institute revealed that while 56% of Americans surveyed said they have “a great deal of trust and confidence” in the services, it was down from 70% when surveyed in 2018. Gallup's
latest study on honesty and ethics reported that “Americans’ confidence in military officers has declined to its lowest level since 2001.”

- Recent estimates suggest that out of the roughly 32 million young Americans of recruitable age, only nine million are eligible. The rest have such disqualifying factors as obesity, addiction, criminal records, poor academic performance, and mental health issues.

U.S., Thai, and Republic of Korea forces in a combined exercise in Thailand. Photo by Corporal Zachary Scanlon, Marine Corps Station Yuma

U.S. Pinckney (DDG-91), Naval Base - Ventura County, California; Blue Angels exhibit, Naval Aviation Museum, Pensacola, Florida. Photos by Paul Grossgold.

E-2D Hawkeye operating on the USS Ronald Reagan (CVN 76) in the Philippine Sea (Photo by Petty Officer Third Class Oswald Felix, Jr.)
Perhaps the greatest challenge facing Navy and Marine Corps recruiters is a waning interest in military service among the “Gen Z” demographic. In a recent article in the U.S. Naval Institute’s magazine *Proceedings*, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General David H. Berger, writes: “...There is evidence that the existing narrative of military service, one that appealed to earlier generations, does not resonate in the same ways with Gen Z.”

Digging deeper into this phenomenon, Stanford University researcher Roberta Katz and two colleagues joined forces on a multi-year project to better understand the generation born in the mid-1990s to roughly 2010. According to Katz, “a typical Gen Zer is a self-driver who deeply cares about others, strives for a diverse community, is highly collaborative and social, values flexibility, relevance, authenticity and non-hierarchical leadership.” Gen Zers, according to Katz, are more likely than older people “to question rules and authority.”

**So, what can be done?**

Beginning with the declining eligibility of potential recruits, the Navy and other services must resist the urge to simply reduce physical, legal, and academic standards without careful consideration of impacts to combat effectiveness. Clearly, issues of obesity and poor academic performance are societal in nature and must be addressed as matters of national security. That said, the military should expand its dialogue with K-12 and collegiate
administrators to stress the benefits of careers in the military, as well as the recruiting requirements.

Restoring the public’s trust in the military, on the other hand, is a line of effort directly within the control of the Navy and it all starts at the top. Navy leaders must “walk the talk” of maintaining the highest personal standards of excellence and ethical behavior. Setting expectations, training to those expectations, and holding people to account if they fail to meet those standards, must become ingrained in the daily work of every leader, both officer and enlisted.

Changing the attitudes of a generation that is increasingly disinclined to serve will be difficult but is achievable. At its core, this is a challenge of salesmanship. The idea of military service, as well as its benefits, must be sold to a rising generation of young people who are not learning about it from their parents and other community leaders to the extent that they did in the past. Super Bowl commercials showing action scenes are no longer enough. If the Navy is to become an employer of choice, then we must get into the schools and neighborhoods to meet young people directly.

A successful outreach campaign might include:

- Speak directly to the generational characteristics of today’s potential recruits. Begin by stating that in many ways this is not the Navy of the past. Today’s Navy is a highly technical and intellectually stimulating organization. It is growing steadily in diversity, and values collaboration and innovative thought. It is far less doctrinal than in years past and this reality must be communicated to a society that is largely unaware.
● We must be clear that the military mission is fundamentally different from all others. Actual combat operations will always demand that orders be given and carried out in a hierarchical fashion.

● Brag about the good stuff. Many aspects of the Navy will resonate with Gen Zers if properly communicated. Relating to relevance, the Navy does important work on a mission that is greater than any individual, while at the same time valuing every individual. Regarding the Gen Z desire to take care of others, the Navy has always had a culture of sailors caring for each other. In addition, the core values of honor, courage, and commitment, if properly packaged, will also appeal to them.

● Expand the use of partnerships with institutions of higher learning. The model used by the Naval Sea Systems Command, ROTC/NROTC programs and academic institutions can be ways to gain visibility with students who are in the process of making career choices, while also influencing curricula to ensure the Navy’s academic needs are being addressed. As part of such a program, students can be given an opportunity to spend time with a Naval unit to get firsthand experience and meet sailors in their work environment.

● Assign top performing officers and enlisted sailors to recruiting billets. In the past this has not always been a priority and as a result, recruiting effectiveness has suffered. In addition, recruiting assignments have not always been viewed as “career enhancing,” so top performers have avoided it. These policies and attitudes must change and will only do so if directed from the top.

● Learn from the best corporations how they recruit, train, and retain top talent. Initiatives may include sending personnel to business leadership schools, authorizing sabbaticals so top performers can get business degrees or even spend a year on a management team of a top company. These and other “out of the box” ideas could help improve the Navy’s leadership and management processes.

In closing, the authors did not intend to present an exhaustive list of actions needed to “fix” the Navy. The United States Navy remains the finest maritime fighting force on the planet with a long and proud history on which to reflect. Leaders like John Paul Jones, Oliver Hazard Perry, Chester Nimitz, Raymond Spruance, and William “Bull” Halsey will always continue to inspire. Still, the missteps alluded to earlier, as well as the challenges discussed above, must be addressed with renewed vigor, innovative thinking, and relentless action.
References


Katz, Roberta, & Stanford University Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences colleagues (3 January 2022). Gen Z are not “coddled” - They are highly collaborative, self-reliant and pragmatic. *Stanford News*, Palo Alto, CA.


About the Authors

Paul S. Grossgold is a retired navy captain who held commands at sea and ashore. After leaving naval service he served as the Director of the General Services Agency for the County of Ventura, CA, then as Chief of Staff for County of Ventura Third District Supervisor Kelly Long. Grossgold is a former adjunct professor in graduate level leadership and organizational management courses at the University of LaVerne, and taught Theater Security Decision Making at the Naval War College Fleet Seminar Program. He resides in Virginia Beach, Virginia and can be reached at [Paul.Grossgold@ventura.org](mailto:Paul.Grossgold@ventura.org).

Ritch K. Eich, a retired naval reserve captain who commanded three navy units and served at NATO, JCS, Naval War College, Pacific and Atlantic Fleets and Central Command, was chief of public affairs for Blue Shield of CA. After receiving his Ph.D from the University of Michigan, he spent 20 years as a hospital executive. Eich has published five books on leadership, served on more than 10 boards of directors, and chaired the Los Robles Hospital board of trustees. He resides in Thousand Oaks, California and can be reached at [ritcheich@gmail.com](mailto:ritcheich@gmail.com).