
Anchor Up, Chiefs! Reset the Mess

By Captain Mike Lambert, U.S. Navy (Retired)

Move over naval officers, deck plate leadership is the chief petty officers' domain. CPOs celebrated the 114th anniversary of their official designation on 1 April 2007.

Now it's time to retake ownership: CPOs, become the intrusive leaders that Sailors need. Reassert your proper and traditional role.¹

When did the CPO Mess begin to de-

cline and lose some of its effectiveness and credibility? That question is for another writer to research. Right now we just need to heed the words of Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Joe

Campa: “Chief petty officers are first and foremost deck plate leaders charged with developing Sailors and enforcing standards.”² Campa started his assignment as our 11th MCPON (July 2006) with a wakeup call, saying it was time to “reset the Mess.”³

You heard him, Chiefs: in other words, anchor up. Cattle-ranch hands “cowboy up” when they put on their spurs, cinch up their saddles, and get the toughest jobs done; CPOs need to anchor up to get the CPO Mess back on the right track and provide the deck plate leadership that our Navy needs so sorely today.



CHIEFS, HEED MCPON CAMPA The MCPON began his term in the summer of 2006 with a call to “reset the Mess.” Here he speaks at an all-hands call at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, in July 2007.

The CNO pointed to a direct relationship between strength of the CPO Mess and command success: “When a Chiefs’ Mess is hitting on all cylinders, there is no better command, and when a Chiefs’ Mess is not working well, there is nothing worse.”⁴

Anchor Up

This means get out from behind your computer, get out of the CPO Mess, and plant yourself firmly on the deck plates leading our Sailors. No one else can do it, not even that stellar first class who’s been doing a bang-up job as your leading petty officer. A great first class petty officer should never be considered a suitable substitute for a CPO. When the job calls for a CPO, anchor up, Chief, and get the job done. Take that stellar first class petty

officer with you, while you’re at it, and show her or him how it’s done.

Some argue that a CPO Academy would be more useful than CPO initiation (Season of Pride/transition) in developing chiefs. But, based on personal experience, I think a better case can be made for chiefs simply reasserting the role of their mess.

More than 30 years ago, I began my life as a Sailor being raised by Navy chiefs. By most accounts, they did a good job. I would not have progressed from seaman recruit to captain without strong CPO leadership at every level—from my

division chiefs to my command master chiefs. I needed course corrections at every paygrade. Fortunately, there was always a strong CPO to provide the necessary guidance. I have 100 percent confidence that today’s CPOs are even better equipped to provide this guidance to our Sailors and junior officers.

Otherwise, the effectiveness and viability of the Mess will be even further eroded. There can be no compromises when fulfilling the MCPON’s mandate that “Chief petty officers take on the role of standard bearers, to enforce those standards amongst ourselves as well as up and down the chain of command.”⁵ This requires that well-meaning officers step aside and allow the chiefs to do their jobs, while chiefs step forward to act for command-wide excellence.

Overcome the Programs

The Navy has created many “people” programs over the years. Each has somehow diminished the role of the Mess. Not one of these programs is a replacement or substitute for sound CPO leadership. Chiefs, it is time to return to your roots. Not only do your Sailors *need* you there, your officers *want* you there.

There was a time when the chief was a ratings expert, financial adviser, chaplain, mentor, marriage counselor, career counselor, banker, Sexual Assault Victim Intervention rep, Equal Employment Opportunity representative—and, I might add, sometimes mother and father. When I was a second class petty officer in 1978, I would never have considered going above my chief about anything. As a petty officer, I never spoke to my division officer; there was never a need. My leading petty officer was the beginning and the chief was the end of the chain of command for me and the other Sailors in our division.

Things have changed too much. Today it is not uncommon for Sailors of nearly every paygrade to approach officers to ask for one thing or another. Stop! Send them back to their chiefs.

Sailors would be hard-pressed to come up with a question that can’t properly be answered by the Chiefs’ Mess. On Navy Knowledge Online (www.nko.navy.mil), Sailors have posted more than 1,000 questions that bypass not only their chiefs but the entire chain of command. They’re looking for answers to questions that are clearly inside the lifelines—that is, within their chief’s domain.

We need to push these Sailors back to the chiefs before it is too late. The chief in their command has the right answer and can provide it. The continued credibility of the Mess depends on it.

Chiefs need to provide that intrusive leadership so often talked about and so rarely practiced. Get involved in your Sailors’ lives. Avoid broad statements like “All Sailors are leaders.” This type of statement only confuses people. All Sailors are not leaders. Sailors can’t be left to their own devices. They need to be led, and chiefs must provide this leadership.

Lead the Sailors

Even some of our senior officers are not the type of leaders we need them to

be. The Navy Inspector General's report from December 2004 showed that during 2003 and the first six months of 2004, 38 commanding officers were relieved. Just six months into 2007, 10 commanding officers have already been relieved, according to Captain Michael Reed, Fleet Forces Command's Inspector General. That is one fewer than for all of 2006.⁶

Half of these dismissals were due to personal misconduct. Neither the wardroom nor the CPO Mess has a monopoly on quality leaders. But a strong CPO Mess can make us all—from seaman to admiral—better at our jobs if we let the chiefs do their jobs and stop trying to turn them into division officers.

As the MCPON said, "Leadership on the division and deck plate level is a leadership dynamic that requires two people."⁷ We need chiefs and officers, and both have their roles.

The division officer develops initial management and leadership skill while being responsible for the division's performance and conduct, watch bills, material condition, and readiness of equipment and spaces, work supervision and damage control readiness. Foundational leadership begins on the deck plates, which is where the chiefs come in.

MCPON Campa is making many positive steps in the right direction to reset the Mess. Chiefs, if you follow his guidance, you have a good chance of getting the CPO Mess back to its critical role in the success

of our Navy. Then it will genuinely contribute once again to command excellence. MCPON Campa may not be the first to have thought of these improvements, but he's forging ahead with them by:

- Issuing MCPON's CPO Season Guidance

- Providing new policy on CMC badges and a single name for our command master chiefs

- Scrapping what had been called the CNO/MCPON Leadership Panel and renaming it the MCPON's Leadership Mess

- Opening the Senior Leadership Academy to CPOs

- Recognizing the difference between the CPO Mess and the wardroom and ensuring the lines of authority are not blurred any further

- Establishing and formalizing standards for the CPO Mess afloat and ashore through appropriate Navy instructions and directives

- Recognizing once and for all that experiments similar to the Decatur CPO Division Officer effort are not necessary and waste the Navy's time. CPOs possess the intellect and skills to be division officers, just as master chiefs can excel in the demanding academic environment of the Naval War College. We don't need experiments to prove these things; they are self-evident.

These actions alone will not reset the CPO Mess, but it's a start. Remember officers, the chiefs have the deck. Chiefs, anchor up. Help the MPCON get the job

done. "The tone of the ship, the tone of the service itself must come more directly from the chief petty officers than from any other group of people in the Navy. You have the standard; live up to it."⁸

1. In 1976 the Navy chartered a study, "Command Excellence: What It Takes to Be the Best," to distinguish high-performing from average commands. In the former, the study found that the CPO Mess (1) Acts for command-wide excellence; (2) Leads divisions actively; (3) Enforces standards; (4) Supports and develops division officers; (5) Is cohesive; (6) Has a strong leader. See <http://therealnavy.com/Documents/ChartingTheCourseToCommandExcellence.pdf>.

2. MCPON Campa's Mission, Vision and Guiding Principles for Chief Petty Officers, 16 Oct. 2006, www.navy.mil/navydata/mcpcon/MCPON_M-V-GP1.doc.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Interview with CNO Michael Mullen, *Navy Times*, Sept. 2005, <http://www.news.navy.mil/navydata/leadership/quotes.asp?q=11>.

5. "Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Office Turns 40," NNS070116-05, 16 Jan. 2007, http://www.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story_id=27321.

6. Andrew Scutro, "OO Firings on Track to Match 2003 Record," *Navy Times*, 10 July 2007, http://www.navytimes.com/news/2007/07/navy_COfirings_070709/.

7. Mark D. Faram, "chief Concerns: MCPON Campa Outlines Visions, Goals for the Mess," *Navy Times*, <http://goatlocker.org/resources/cpo/concerns.htm>.

8. (*Bluejackets Manual*, 1918 edition, part 4, <http://goatlocker.org/resources/cpo/about/1918.htm>).

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