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U.S. Coast Guard History Program

Charting Progress: The Assessment of Core Values in the U. S. Coast Guard

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Abstract

The U. S. Coast Guard instituted core values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty in 1994. This paper attempts to assess the presence of these values at operational Coast Guard units. After spending five to ten weeks aboard ships during 1998, Coast Guard Academy Cadets were surveyed on the presence of the core values at those units. In general, the core values were observed at reasonably high levels, which is a positive finding for the Coast Guard. In observing evidence of the core values, there were no statistically significant differences found between male and female cadets, another positive result.

1. Introduction

The U.S. Coast Guard has taken steps during recent years to establish core values for the Service. The Core Values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty were established in 1994. Since that time these values have been emphasized in varying degrees throughout the Service, including appropriate emphasis in Commandants' Vision Statements, policy statements, and training programs. It would seem that it is now appropriate to attempt to assess the presence of these core values at operating units. Assessment is important for a number of reasons. First, it helps address the question of whether or not the values exist and to what extent they are recognized and considered by Coast Guard members as they perform their daily duties. It also helps to identify whether one of the values is regarded as more important than the others or if there are perceptions of conflict between the core values. Finally, assessment can provide insight on how the values are perceived by different groups within the Service (e.g., Do men and women perceive differences in one or more of the core values?).

This study attempts to address these issues. It represents an initial effort to systematically assess the presence of Coast Guard core values at operational units. The findings have implications for

a variety of groups in the Service. Those in senior leadership positions are provided feedback on the perceived existence of these values (and a sense of whether people are paying "lip service" to these values, while behaving in ways that are inconsistent with them). Those engaged in leadership development activities and those providing initial Service indoctrination for service members at accession points (Basic Training, Officer Candidate School, and the Coast Guard Academy Cadet Program) can receive feedback for their programs. Since this study also involves the sampling of those serving at operational units throughout the Coast Guard afloat community, unit commanding officers are provided feedback regarding the existence of these core values at the operating unit level.

Section 2 provides a brief summary on the development of the Coast Guard's core values and the subsequent benefits for the Service. Section 3 presents some challenges associated with the emphasis of core values within the military services. Section 4 provides details on the sample used to assess the Coast Guard's core values and Section 5 discusses the results obtained from this effort. Section 6 provides conclusions and recommendations for further assessment activities.

2. Development of Coast Guard Core Values and Subsequent Benefits

During March, 1993, those engaged in Coast Guard leadership development activities met to evaluate the Service's Leadership Program. During that meeting it was recognized that the absence of commonly stated core values was problematic to leadership development efforts. Work was started to identify appropriate core values. In October 1993, the Coast Guard Office of Personnel and Training assembled a study group to make recommendations to improve leadership development in the Service. This group built upon the initial work from 1993 and subsequently identified and defined the Coast Guard Core Values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty. These were approved by the Commandant of the Coast Guard, Admiral Robert Kramek, and were officially promulgated in April 1994 (Leadership Project, 5). Table 1 provides the definitions of these core values.

Initial examination of the Coast Guard core values reveals differences from the core values of other services, particularly as it relates to the Core Value of Respect. For example, the Navy and Marine Corps identified core values of "Honor, Courage, and Commitment," while the Air Force defined its core values as "Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All We Do." The context relating to the development of these core values is important in explaining this difference. In 1993-1994, the Coast Guard as an organization was focusing on issues of diversity in its work force. The Service completed a "Women in the Coast Guard Study" in 1990, which indicated a number of leadership issues that needed attention to insure the fair treatment of women (Women in the Coast Guard Study). In 1992 the Coast Guard Academy completed an institutional Climate Assessment and Cultural Audit, which indicated a number of problems regarding the professional treatment of women and minorities (Culture and Climate Assessment). The military and civilian work force of the Coast Guard was becoming more diverse and the Coast Guard needed to place organizational emphasis on "respect" issues. The Core Value of "Respect" is also an appropriate fit with the humanitarian nature of the Service and various Coast Guard missions, including search and rescue and law enforcement.

There are many significant Service benefits associated with the development of the Coast Guard core values. These have included an opportunity to emphasize a common set of core values, particularly at accession points. At the Coast Guard Academy, 25-30% of the Cadet Corps turns over on an annual basis. Cadets entering the Academy have a more diverse set of values than those who arrived five, ten or twenty years ago. Being able to focus on a set of core values (a new cadet's first character development session occurs on the second or third day of our basic training period) is important in obtaining the behavior desired by the Coast Guard. Thus, the core values "mark the channel" as cadets begin their voyages through the Academy experience. Once cadets or other new Coast Guard members accept the core values, they are valuable when the cadets progress and subsequently serve in leadership positions.

A related benefit of the developed Coast Guard core values is that they are relatively easy to define. While most Coast Guard members may not be able to recite word for word the definitions provided in Table 1, almost everyone has a working definition that is reasonable in describing each value. This is important because of the constant turnover at Coast Guard units and the ever-changing missions that involve the Coast Guard. The core values provide a central piece in the moral compasses of Coast Guard members no matter where they are located or how they are serving others.

Another important benefit of having core values articulated is that they guide all members in making ethical decisions and thus help reinforce the behavior desired by the Coast Guard. Coast Guard people make ethical decisions every day in the performance of their duties. Whether interacting with each other or the public it serves, ethics is almost always part of the equation. The core values provide a "framework for moral reasoning" (Myers) that is needed to address what may many times be complex ethical dilemmas. Kidder identified categories of challenging ethical dilemmas, including truth versus loyalty, individual versus community, short-term versus long-term, and justice versus mercy (Kidder, 18). All of these have applicability to those performing Coast Guard missions. A sound understanding of the core values assists in the resolution of these and other ethical challenges.

Possibly the best reason for the establishment of Coast Guard core values has not been realized yet. In recent times, ethical challenges have inevitably developed for organizations when least expected. The Coast Guard has been fortunate in this regard during recent years. It is during these times when the core values may prove most valuable for the Service. There are many examples to illustrate this point. Probably the best is Johnson & Johnson's handling of its Tylenol incident in 1992. By completely recalling the product, Johnson & Johnson made the right choice and this resulted in long-term success. The company's CEO, James Burke, has repeatedly said that the Johnson & Johnson's "Credo" listing its values was vital in this decision-making process (Peters, 330-332). In times of crisis an organization cannot determine what its core values are; it must react. Organizations that have made the investment in identifying core values and guiding principles prior to a crisis are in a much better position to respond to it. In this regard, Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty should prove extremely valuable if and when the Coast Guard must face an ethical crisis of its own.

3. Core Values "Challenges" in the Military Services

All of the military services have emphasized core values during the 1990's, and core values have appropriately attracted attention throughout the military. The articulation of core values in the different services has been a reasonable attempt to focus attention on appropriate values and provide guidance to service members concerning their behavior. This process has been repeated in many businesses during recent years (Trevino, 244). However, what has been intended to make things easier has caused some debate and even some discontent regarding core values and attempts to emphasize military ethics. Some have focused on the development of core values and found challenges and even failure, as noted in a recent article about core values in the Marine Corps.

Our effort to inculcate core values is failing because as an institution, we have lost the ability to set a proper example; at every level of the chain of command, those below are losing faith in the integrity of those above. Without this trust, loyalty is impossible, and effective ethical training is impossible. We are left with slogans and lesson plans, the dry shells of concepts that should be the lifeblood of our organization (Jones, 51).

The institution of core values has also made service members wrestle with their application. Do the core values apply to personal conduct? If so, how? Many are uncomfortable with that notion expressed below.

Core values presuppose that ethical leadership is a seamless garment. The old notion that personal behavior and values are irrelevant unless they have a direct impact on professional performance cannot coexist with a serious embrace of core values. Defining honor as selective in relevance is akin to arguing that a woman is slightly pregnant (Phillips, 44).

It is also a bit ironic that the focus on core values in the different services comes at a time in which there is unprecedented improper conduct by those in uniform. Tailhook, Aberdeen, Kelly Flinn, and Marine Corps "blood wings" have all occurred during the decade in which service chiefs have emphasized core values. This has caused even people in the military to question whether the right approaches are being taken to reinforce the desired values and behavior (Goldman).

4. Assessment of the Coast Guard's Core Values

The outlined challenges associated with military core values causes one to tread very lightly when undertaking attempts at assessment. The potential disadvantages of obtaining inaccurate results are significant. What happens if the core values are found not to exist at appropriate levels? Would the outcome be another training program for already overburdened units? Resulting cynicism could even run counter to the core values that the Service wants emphasized. The accurate measurement of core values is also a challenge. Given these issues, this assessment is still worth attempting for the reasons cited in the introduction to this paper. However, one must exercise caution in this endeavor.

In selecting a methodology for assessment of Coast Guard core values, surveying service members is one accepted approach (Trevino, 259). However, one needs to consider potential sources of bias involved with values surveys. Crewmembers at different units may be predisposed to respond that the core values are "alive and well" at their particular units. By their

daily actions, crews contribute to the existence of core values at their units and this "partial ownership" could result in biased responses to core values inquiries ("Of course honor is prevalent at my unit; I am honorable!"). Surveys of Coast Guard units could also be expected to result in "command influence" for positive responses to questions about core values at those units ("We want our unit to have the highest Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty scores - answer accordingly."). Thus, it can be expected to be a challenge to obtain accurate assessment information from surveying crewmembers directly (Trevino, 259).

The approach used to account for the issue of potential crew bias was to not have permanent crewmembers complete these surveys, but to instead use cadets who were temporarily assigned to major Coast Guard Cutters during the 1998 Summer Training Program. Surveys were completed by 134 First Class (Senior) Cadets returning from their summer cruises. This represented essentially the entire Coast Guard Academy Class of 1999. Most were assigned for ten-week periods, although some who participated in internship programs were assigned for five weeks. It was felt that these individuals were assigned to the ships long enough to be able to provide feedback on the existence of the core values. Since they are not permanent members of the crew, they would probably not exhibit the potential bias discussed above.

The role that the cadets have while serving on these ships is important and needs explanation. The First Class Cadets used in this study had recently completed year three of a four year Academy program. During the summer between their third and fourth years, cadets spend five to ten weeks aboard Coast Guard ships to gain professional experience that is necessary for their success as junior officers. The cadets have essentially completed their leadership educational courses, along with three of the four professional development/navigation courses. Since all Coast Guard Academy graduates return to sea for a two-year tour after graduation, this First Class Cruise is essentially a practical professional development and leadership final exam.

Depending on the particular assignment, cadets may find themselves in awkward positions during these summer cruises. In some cases the crewmembers assigned to the ships do not really know how to interact with the cadets and consider them an anomaly. They are not yet officers, but will be commissioned within a year. They are not members of the enlisted crew, yet will frequently live in enlisted berthing areas. They will often be assigned to "shadow" one of the junior officers, but this may not be possible at some of the smaller units. During the five to ten week period they interact with ship's personnel on a daily basis. They receive exposure to many aspects of the unit and are in a good position to provide feedback on the existence of the core values.

For the Coast Guard core values, the First Class Cadet shipboard experiences could be expected to permit the cadets to provide the most accurate feedback on the Core Value of Respect, since that value could be most easily observed. This would tend to be followed by the Core Value of Devotion to Duty, and then the Core Value of Honor. Cadets were surveyed upon their return to the Coast Guard Academy at the end of their summer. They were not briefed prior to their shipboard experiences that they would be providing feedback on the core values. Feedback was received on the perception of the existence of the Coast Guard core values at the particular units using a Likert Scale with a range from 1-5, with one indicating a lower observance of the core values and five indicating a higher observance of the core values. In addition, questions were

asked that would tend to provide evidence regarding the Core Value of Respect, since cadets would probably be able to address this Core Value most easily.

5. Results

Table 2 provides the initial summary data for the practice of core values as observed by cadets. On a 1-5 scale, the mean scores for Honor (4.14, with a standard deviation of .72), Respect (4.06, with a standard deviation of .82), and Devotion to Duty (4.29, with a standard deviation of .68) indicate the cadet observance of these core values at rather high levels. This appears to indicate that these core values are reasonably present at these Coast Guard operating units.

Further analysis of this data can lead to some other noteworthy conclusions. Analysis of Variance calculations were performed on the results by gender to determine if there were perceived differences in the existence of core values. It could reasonably be expected that men and women might tend to view the existence of one or more of the core values differently. Anecdotal data from previous First Class Cruises indicated that certain female cadets observed conduct that was inconsistent with the Core Value of Respect (e.g., inappropriate comments or behavior concerning women at that unit).

The means of the Coast Guard core values by gender is provided in Table 3. While the means for the core values observed by females (Honor – 3.98, Respect – 4.05, Devotion to Duty – 4.20) are lower than for males (Honor – 4.21, Respect – 4.06, Devotion to Duty – 4.32), these differences are not statistically significant. This is also a positive finding for the Coast Guard, for a similar perception by male and female cadets regarding the existence of the core values is a desired outcome. It also indicates that progress has been made regarding the acceptance of women aboard Coast Guard floating units.

Analysis of Variance calculations were also performed by class of ship to reveal if the vessel size/type caused a difference in the observance of core values. The ship classes were divided as follows: High Endurance Cutters (WHECs - 378' Cutters); Medium Endurance Cutters (WMECs - 270' and 210' Cutters); Training Vessels (WIX - The Barque EAGLE Training Ship); Patrol Boats (110' and 82' Cutters); and Buoy Tenders (225', 180' and 157' Cutters). The means for the core values by ship class are provided in Table 4. Once again, there were no statistically significant differences in cadet observance of core values between classes of ships and all of the core value means were reasonably high. This could be considered as another positive finding for the Coast Guard, for it indicates consistency between types of units regarding the existence of core values.

Table 5 provides mean scores for additional queries regarding the Core Value of Respect. The mean scores regarding interactions in the wardroom environment, ships officers, senior enlisted (Chiefs/Leading Petty Officers (POs), junior enlisted (Junior Petty Officers/Non-rates) were all above 4.00. Cadets also observed support for Coast Guard fraternization, gender equity, and human relations policies. This is another positive result and indicates substantial progress has been made in recent years to promote these shipboard interactions and personnel policies. Past summer training periods had highlighted challenges regarding relationships between the cadets

and both senior and junior enlisted personnel. It appears that efforts taken at the Coast Guard Academy and aboard the ships to address this issue have been successful.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Coast Guard has taken positive steps in the development of Service core values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty within the context of its Leadership Development Program. The core values are easily understood by service members and a good fit with service missions. Their existence has aided leadership development efforts at many different units (particularly accession points), has provided a framework to facilitate ethical decision making by members of the Coast Guard, and can be expected to assist the Coast Guard during periods of ethical crisis should they arise.

Assessment of the core values provides valuable feedback to various Coast Guard interested parties, including top leaders and those engaged in leadership development efforts. The results from this study indicate that when assigned to essentially all major Coast Guard Cutters, both male and female cadets observed the Coast Guard core values at reasonably high levels. This did not appear to be influenced by the class of Coast Guard Cutter where the cadets were assigned. These are positive results for the Coast Guard and provide an indication of the presence of the core values at the operating unit level.

It should be emphasized that this study represents an initial effort at assessment of core values for the Coast Guard and there were many limitations associated with this research. First, because this study was conducted within the context of normal program feedback, the cadets listed their names on the surveys. This could have led to biased results. Additional questions on the core values, particularly concerning Honor and Devotion to Duty, would have been valuable in providing additional feedback on these values. The use of a larger range regarding the Likert Scale would be helpful in providing distinction in the observance of the core values.

Assessment efforts in this and other areas of the Coast Guard organizational culture should continue. In this study there was an interest in using Coast Guard ships. In a study involving Coast Guard units, Defining Issues Test scores were found to be lower for both officers and enlisted personnel assigned to ships, indicating a lower level of moral reasoning ability (White). Further research in this area could involve surveys of shore units and ships to determine any differences in the existence of core values at those units. This study should also be replicated in future years to validate results and identify trends. The Coast Guard has recently increased its organizational ability to conduct such research. In May 1998, the Coast Guard founded a Leadership Development Center at the Coast Guard Academy and its Research and Assessment Branch will conduct such research that will benefit the Service.

Table 1 - U. S. Coast Guard Core Values

Honor - Integrity is our standard. We demonstrate uncompromising ethical conduct and moral behavior in all of our personal actions. We are loyal and accountable to the public trust.

Respect - We value our diverse work force. We treat each other with fairness, dignity, and compassion. We encourage creativity through empowerment. We work as a team.

Devotion to Duty - We are professionals, military and civilian, who seek responsibility, accept accountability, and are committed to the successful achievement of our organizational goals. We exist to serve. We serve with pride.

These Core Values are more than just Coast Guard rules of behavior. They are deeply rooted in the heritage that has made our organization great. They demonstrate who we are and guide our performance, conduct, and decisions every minute of every day. Because we each represent the Coast Guard to the public, we must all embrace these values in our professional undertakings as well as in our personal lives.

Table 2 - Coast Guard Core Values – Mean Results

Coast Guard Core Value Mean Score Std. Deviation

Honor 4.14 .72

Respect 4.06 .82

Devotion to Duty 4.29 .68

Table 3 – Mean Results - Gender

Coast Guard Core Value

Gender Honor Respect Devotion to Duty

Mean/Std Dev Mean/Std Dev Mean/Std Dev

Males (94 Cadets) 4.21/.71 4.06/.73 4.32/.65

Females (40 Cadets) 3.98/.70 4.05/1.01 4.20/.65

Table 4 – Mean Results - Type of Ship (By Class)

Coast Guard Core Value

Class of Ship Honor Respect Devotion to Duty

Mean/Std Dev Mean/Std Dev Mean/Std Dev

WHECs (37 Cadets) 4.08/.64 4.13/.79 4.10/.66
 WMECs (41 Cadets) 4.02/.82 4.14/.57 4.24/.54
 WIX (17 Cadets) 4.17/.64 3.76/.90 4.00/.94
 WPBs (12 Cadets) 4.25/.86 4.08/.67 4.75/.45
 WLBs (24 Cadets) 4.33/.64 3.96/.16 4.58/.65

Table 5 – Mean Results - Respect Indicators

Respect Indicators Mean Score Std. Deviation

Comfortable in the wardroom environment 4.11 .91
 Comfortable with ship's officers 4.39 .73
 Comfortable with Chiefs/Leading PO's 4.29 .75
 Comfortable with Junior PO's/Non-rates 4.28 .74
 Extent that unit supported/upheld
 Coast Guard fraternization, gender
 equity and human relations policies 4.08 .82

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