

COs' Views of Commodores

David K Brown

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David.k.brown@navy.mil

DSN 341-4194

Background

- Dissertation research interviewed 16 former COs on wide range of issues in Command-
 - Topics spanned from desire, to their paths to their expectations, challenges, and surprises.
- Most COs had multiple command experiences- 30 different ships represented.
- Mostly CRUDES but also AMPHIB, Mine Force, and PCs.
- Most COs confessed to having problems understanding their bosses.

COs and Commodores

- Commanders (CDRs) in their O-5 commands have the tough position in working for the Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) commander, an O-6 Captain (the "Commodore") and former CO, who oversees a number of ships.
- The ships are not always on the same cycle or even close to the Commodore's schedule.
- All COs confessed to having problems understanding their bosses.
- Only one had kind words for a Commodore.
- Even in the world of lighting communications and increased connectivity, communications breakdowns and misunderstandings still occurred.

Example

- CO5 related:
- I was shocked by the low amount of faith any senior showed in me on the DDG. The whole time in command, I was never asked an opinion, and discovered there were 500 ways to get in touch with you to keep advised- or confused.
- He had recorded the impetus for these thoughts in a series of entries in his CO's logbook:
 - D-28: Got a fairly blistering email from Commodore around mid-day and spent the rest of the day trying to figure out how to answer it.
 - I'm sure he meant well, but it came across as a significant indictment of the ship and of my materiel management track record for the first four weeks in command.....
 - My reaction varied from amusement to bewilderment.
 - Hope he doesn't take offense at the answer I provided.

All COs told stories involving challenges with their Bosses-1

- CO4, CO5, CO6, CO7, and CO14 discussed their puzzlement when their bosses (Commodores or CSG Commanders) questioned their actions or ignored their suggestions for improving future operations.

All COs told stories involving challenges with their Bosses-2

- Several recalled words from a Boss which still stung.
 - Following a tough INSURV, the TYCOM asked a CO what the CO could have done better to have been more prepared.
 - The CO then showed him the brief he gave 9 months earlier asking for assistance from Commodore and TYCOM to fix certain gear and gain more senior people.
 - All without action they blamed on “funding” constraints- but to recover from the INSURV, more than three times the amount of money was expended in the three weeks prior to deployment.
 - This experience hurt senior leader credibility.

All COs told stories involving challenges with their Bosses-3

- CO14 recalled his TYCOM's response when he questioned the sagacity of the decision to eliminate SWOS Basic/ Division Officer Course.
 - He was told to “Shut up and color”
 - Even... “When I do want your opinion, I’ll ask for it. Don’t volunteer your advice ever again.”

All COs told stories involving challenges with their Bosses-4

- CO15 in PC Command related when the TYCOM publically admitted that he thought the small ships and experienced crews were wasting Navy assets.
 - This was just after the 2 PCs had returned from very successful CD OPS deployments.
 - Both of those COs recalled that under their breath, senior officers questioned their sagacity about going to command as LTs. (“Hope you don’t screw up and ruin your career.”)

All COs told stories involving challenges with their Bosses-5

- CO6 was aghast that near the end of his tour, after playing major roles in OIF, the TYCOM came on the ship and warned his wardroom to watch him carefully during his last month in command.
- CO6 later related: “I also had to deal with an overbearing Commodore. “
 - He tried to get me to focus more on Engineering programs.
 - The Commodore was starting to micromanage a guy who had been a 1200-psig EOOW, and a GS EOOW so I basically ignored him.
 - The other COs and I created the “CO Mutual Protection Society” for defense of the waterfront.

All COs told stories involving challenges with their Bosses-6

- CO3 noted “Information only seemed to flow one-way”:
 - In the middle of our deployment, we found out that we were going to go again with only a six-month turnaround.
 - Not the way you’d want to find out: We discovered that tidbit of bad news when the information was buried in the Partnership of the Americas (PoA) deployment message that assigned ships and Helo Dets. ... although we were on one, we noted that we were scheduled again within a year.
 - I had no idea that was happening... there was no top-level cover or warning... and there was no way to prevent release of that schedule from causing a negative effect on crew morale, and the word screaming back to the families.
 - That’s the same staff that would call anytime to ask the status of mundane matters.

All COs told stories involving challenges with their Bosses-7

- CO7:
 - In CDR command, I had to spend a lot of time learning to deal with my Commodore.
 - I had designed a scheme for ASW ops in the Taiwan Straits as we were sent there to show support for Taiwan when China threatened to disrupt their presidential elections in 1996.
 - He was not impressed that I took the initiative to apply my ASW knowledge and try to maximize our capability.

All COs told stories involving challenges with their Bosses-7

- CO9 defined an approach taken by many:
 - I thought my early COs had been allowed to command more than we were.
 - There was no email. You could only get outside information from snail mail, message traffic, or the radio. Now, even when the ISIC is off the ship, there is a lot more tasking from many directions- ISIC, TYCOM, CLASSRON, etc.
 - The bosses are micromanaging everything: checking your programs, training, Drug and Alcohol Program Advisor, and constantly harping.
 - No day went by without several emails from the staff tasking us for data that had to be reported immediately.
 - I finally told my wardroom that no email from outside the ship could be answered without a four-hour delay to try to slow the pace.

All COs told stories involving challenges with their Bosses-8

- The pall of micromanagement was explained by CO13:
 - Since I had been a Department Head, the number of people who thronged to see the ship multiplied.
 - I tried to make sure I knew who they were and why they were there.
 - In dealing with my seniors, there were a couple of times when I could tell the Commodore was probing for information on 'why' certain things happened the way he thought they did.
 - When I was a Department Head, the message coming off the ship was managed better.
 - Now a guy from the staff comes down for two seconds and reports something back to Commodore who immediately calls you up.
 - We have less room to maneuver due to the many lines of comms.

All COs told stories involving challenges with their Bosses-9

- The upper chain of command's appetite for information is "mind-numbing." (CO13).
- CO1 was the first to declare how suffocating the continuous guidance from above on his ability to command.
 - "Every aspect of my life was micromanaged."
- CO15 addressed the need to control from the top in helping his OOD discover the right questions to ask.
 - "What information do we need?"

Summary: Where to go?

- In their efforts to help commanders with the perceived problem, those who are now in supervisory leadership positions have become tedious meddlers rather than helpful mentors.
- COs must muster all their courage to stay professional.
- CO4 noted: “I felt like my job in command was to shield the three hundred folks inside the lifelines from those who would make their lives miserable.”
- A question for future study would be “Who is thinking about the COs?”

Take Aways

- Relationships-Mutual Respect
- Careful how you say what you say
- Mentor, coach, teach
- Learn what drives your COs and how much they care for their troops.
- Counsel strongly when necessary- face to face if possible.
 - Often Commodores discover Toxic leaders in Command.
- Don't forget what it was like for you.