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REPORTS OR READINESS: A DILEMMA

"Pencil pushing" was once an activity thought to occupy the time of shore duty officers only, but over the years the operating manager afloat has found his time increasingly preempted by reporting requirements, often at the expense of essential combat readiness functions. If the proliferation of these time consuming and expensive reports is to be arrested, a sound administrative reports control system should be employed that emphasizes the costs of information, the principles of exception reporting, and sample theory.

A paper prepared for the course in Defense Economics
and Decisionmaking at the Naval War College

by

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Introduction

Life at sea is a high adventure. The few young Americans who still go down to the sea in ships are usually rugged and outspoken in their own element. Seamen have traditionally enjoyed a high degree of tolerance coupled with a keen sense of justice. As a kinetic group, they respect authority and willingly follow the precepts of their shorebound superiors. This authority, however, when it is abused or unreasonable, inculcates a spirit of disregard by the men who man the fleet ships.¹ Individualism remains a keystone and an essential ingredient of most effective navies, and the constraining ship administrative reports system presently in effect in our own Navy has proven to be a catalyst for resentment by fleet

officers. Indeed, the cancerous growth of a cumbersome, often redundant reporting system has led many of the 90 percent of the surface junior officers who leave the fleet at their first opportunity to list the onerous administrative burden as a principal complaint. Neither is it inexplicable that career surface warfare officers in the full vigor of their professional careers seek opportunities ashore to avoid the administrative liability of senior shipboard positions.

To command a surface combatant was once a challenge and an adventure; but the administrative burden of command has so mushroomed that even a return to homeport is frequently dreaded as the prelude to yet another recurring reporting requirement. In the 2-year period from 1971 through 1973, the fleet ships experienced a 38 percent

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increase in their recurring reporting requirements.* The surface combatant officers are frequently erudite men of varied and rich experience, and many have read former Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's testimony to the Armed Services Committee that substantial reductions in paperwork deemed counterproductive to efficient management have been effected at all levels.² As efforts were supposedly continuing to reduce reporting requirements that were not only wasteful of time and effort but not conducive to good management practice, the destroyer skipper or frustrated executive officer could only wonder why his superiors were failing to comply with the Department of Defense imperative. Not only was paperwork not reduced, but one-time spot reports, which usually matured into a recurring report of some sort, proliferated during this period, and 75 percent of those requirements were initiated by non-Washington activities.³ Following the poor example of their superiors and in response to the new demands for information about people, salaries, human goals, drug abuse, alcohol control, ammunition expenditures, fuel consumption, ad infinitum, 25 percent more internal ship feeder reports were generated in the naive belief that these documents would be effective management tools.⁴

In port, ship officers and senior petty officers have become pencil pushers to a displeasurable degree. Ship officers assigned ashore seem to have forgotten their sea experiences and fail to assess the precious executive man-hours consumed in preparing reports.⁵ The clerical support on board ship is hardly

adequate to meet crew administrative requirements, let alone tackle new formal reporting procedures. From the ship operator perspective, this numbing paperwork routine detracts measurably from training and material readiness tasks. Some reports may be ignored with no expectation of retribution, but the uncertainty resulting from a deliberate reports omission policy is unsettling for the destroyer skipper.

Mastery of Naval Management Principles

The naval reports system exists to ensure that information is passed from one echelon of command to another to allow decisionmakers to perform their prescribed functions, and a regular reporting and records system is used to produce desired behavior and, further, to cause that behavior to persist. Attention and behavior in an administrative organization, once initiated in a particular direction, tends to persist for a considerable period of time. Unfortunately, compliance without reasonable questioning by commanders of reporting units has produced a burdensome load that seems to feed on itself.

In the work *The Effective Executive*, Mr. Peter Drucker elucidated on the principle of management time budgets. The executive's time tends to belong to someone else.⁶ If an operational executive is defined through his activities, one would have to call him a captive of the organization. Everyone—seniors, contemporaries, and juniors—can move in on his time and everyone does. Professor Sune Carlson, a Swedish management consultant, confirmed in his book *Executive Behavior* that recorded time usage of executives revealed that their time was consistently preempted by matters of importance to someone else.⁷

The destroyer commanding officer has complete, final responsibility for the battle readiness of his command. Yet his work toward achieving battle readiness

*The author audited his reports tickler file upon assuming the duties of destroyer executive officer in December 1971. Upon relief in September of 1973, the number of required recurring reports had grown from 116 to 160, the 160th being received on the last day of duty.

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may be to a large degree replaced by administrative work priorities established by his off-ship superiors. In an era where the shore-bound naval officer specialist dominates, the specialty area reports compete strongly for first priority in the time budget of the shipboard generalist. The calendar period reporting system does not allow the ship commanding officer to direct internal shipwork close to the end of the calendar month, especially when the month's end coincides with the finish of a fiscal quarter or fiscal year.⁸ The skipper may demand compliance with his priorities but only at measurable cost in work efficiency and personal loyalty. The junior officers are forced to crowd burdensome administrative chores into extended workdays, both at sea and in port. Duty nights in port are dedicated to administrative projects to the detriment of running efficient watch sections. The penalty for this is apparent—junior officers swiftly exit to civilian life where family commitments need not be ignored to satisfy often needless administrative requirements.

Law of the Situation

Recent studies of administrative behavior by Professor David A. Kolb, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, revealed that managers tend to judge subordinates' performance on relatively small samples of their own experience.⁹ The human mind is a clever mechanism that tends to erase unpleasant experiences over a period of time and recall only the best of personal achievements. The middle echelon commander recalls and compares his own successes to the perceived failures of his subordinates at similar tasks. However, this simple theory yields rather poor predictions and subordinate echelon managers spend substantial time solving problems defined by others.¹⁰ Middle managers often unjustly rate subordinates low in responsibility, judgment,

and initiative. They attempt to ensure their own importance by holding on to information, maintaining close control and reserving the right to make decisions. The superior echelon commander in turn demands management information for those decisions he reserves unto himself.¹¹ Therefore, this situational law can be seen as a prime reason for many of the recurring reports. As a bureaucratic organization, the Navy does not reward managers for inclusion of subordinates in decision-making. Information to make decisions is demanded from the ships, but just as in industry, this information is frequently misused or ignored.¹² Heuristic decisions are common even when adequate analysis information is available.

A conjugate management principle is that control is an additive and expanding phenomena. Once an agency or staff gains access to an operating unit for regular reports information, their span of control widens and additional reporting requirements proliferate.¹³

Countering the Situational Law. Peter Drucker found that for the executive to systematically manage his own time, he must identify and eliminate nonproductive tasks.¹⁴ He suggests a diagnostic question, "What would happen if this were not done?" If the answer is "nothing," then stop doing it. He is supported by Mr. Auren Uris, writing in his book *The Turned-On Executive*.¹⁵

Mr. Robert Townsend, in his tongue-in-cheek management text *Up the Organization*, asks the fundamental question about new reporting requirements, "Are we trying to do something worthwhile here or are we just building a monument to some diseased ego?"¹⁶ These three suggestions constitute administrative heresy for the shipboard officer, but emphasize the consequences of seniors violating their span of control.

Why Not Naval Productivity Analysis?

A major consumer of highly priced officer time is paperwork. In a recent Atlantic Fleet Commander survey, 196 of 324 officers queried considered paperwork requirements to be excessive.¹⁷ In *Organizational Psychology*, Mr. David Kolb found, by a survey of 52 managers of a large corporation, that 32 percent desired fewer reporting requirements,¹⁸ 8 percent wanted more reports, and 60 percent were satisfied with the status quo. One of his conclusions was that for many managers, the expectations of the organization were consistent with their own ideas of time required for effective planning. This contrasts markedly with the 60 percent of afloat naval officers surveyed by the Atlantic Fleet Commander who considered their reporting requirements excessive and, in Mr. Kolb's terms, not in consonance with their expectations of how to effectively plan and manage fleet units.

In 1971 the Vice Chief of Naval Operations requested that the Naval Audit Service perform a special audit on fleet reporting and related paperwork.¹⁹ The purpose of this audit was to appraise and evaluate reporting requirements and to recommend ways to improve the system, reduce related paperwork, and to eliminate unjustified reporting requirements. This tasking preceded Secretary Laird's recognition of excessive paperwork requirements and reveals high level Navy management concern with the paperwork mess. General policy directives had required a continuing and systematic review of all reports to assure that they are meaningful contributions with an emphasis on minimum effort and cost, but, as suggested earlier, the force of this directive simply did not penetrate to the operating fleet level. The Naval Audit Service summarized by noting that these reviews, when performed, had little long range effect on the spiraling paper-

work loads. They also found that the cost and complexity of the Navy reporting system is consistently increasing because more and more detailed reports are demanded of subordinate commanders. The Audit Service analyzed 147 specific reporting requirements and found that 24 percent were redundant and cost the Navy an estimated \$2,057,649. By August 1973 the number of required recurring reports had increased to 160, with additional costs.²⁰ Fleet officers are not so concerned with dollar costs involved as they are in the waste of ships' officers time on nonproductive administrative tasks which adversely affect operational readiness.

Ship Productivity Analysis. U.S. Navy ships face a manpower "crunch" and today we find that shipboard personnel are doing less to ensure ship readiness for combat. "Productivity" is becoming a prime concern, but as pointed out in a recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* by Mr. Richard Rosenbloom, Government productivity has never been measured.²¹ For naval personnel the term "productivity" has little meaning as no measurements of productive effort have been introduced to the fleet. Certainly the volume of reports leaving the ship are not a measure of ship productivity.

The respected management professor and writer Mr. Rensis Lickert advocates the value of productivity measurement in his text *New Patterns of Management*.²² His research indicated that the more accurate the measurement of productivity, the greater the correlation between productivity and management principles and practices. Professor Lickert also became convinced that an active interest in the ongoing work, combined with a hands-off policy concerning its direction, is perhaps the most fruitful course a manager can follow.²³ The fully competent manager who keeps in touch with his subordinates

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must be careful not to impose his own ideas. Based on his findings, Lickert developed a graph (figure 1) to measure the effect of close daily supervision against less frequent contact where degrees of independence in decision-making are a factor. A conclusion from the graph is that freedom of decision is most effective where there is a high interaction of superiors and subordinates.²⁴

These findings apply to our naval work environment as well. The reports system was devised to influence and control behavior, as well as provide data to higher level managers. The reports system, a poor substitute for eyeball contact, serves as a barrier to communications and therefore to genuine interaction. The transient nature of our ship operations is recognized but the inability of shore-bound staff personnel to interact with ships company, except through a formal reporting system, is detrimental to ship readiness. At any rate, information can be communicated orally in 30 minutes that takes 10 hours to produce in a formal written report, a ratio of 20:1.²⁵ Here is where pro-

ductivity gains can be realized in regular administrative functions.

Witness our 3-M system. Originally simple and clever, the addition of a plethora of reporting requirements covering all phases of maintenance management has made the system counterproductive. Negative motivation to accomplish and report maintenance has been introduced in the form of frequent and demanding inspections. Because the clerical functions of the 3-M reporting system are routine and repetitive and are the overly directed responsibility of a senior petty officer or junior officer, support for the system has dwindled in the fleet. The 3-M system should be an excellent vehicle for measuring the maintenance performance of enlisted technicians and the scheduling ability of officers, but the monotony of filling out multiple maintenance forms has lessened work satisfaction at all levels and adversely affected productivity.

Reports that are an end in themselves are given only cursory treatment by those to whom they are directed. Reports that are a part of the control system—not just for accountability, but

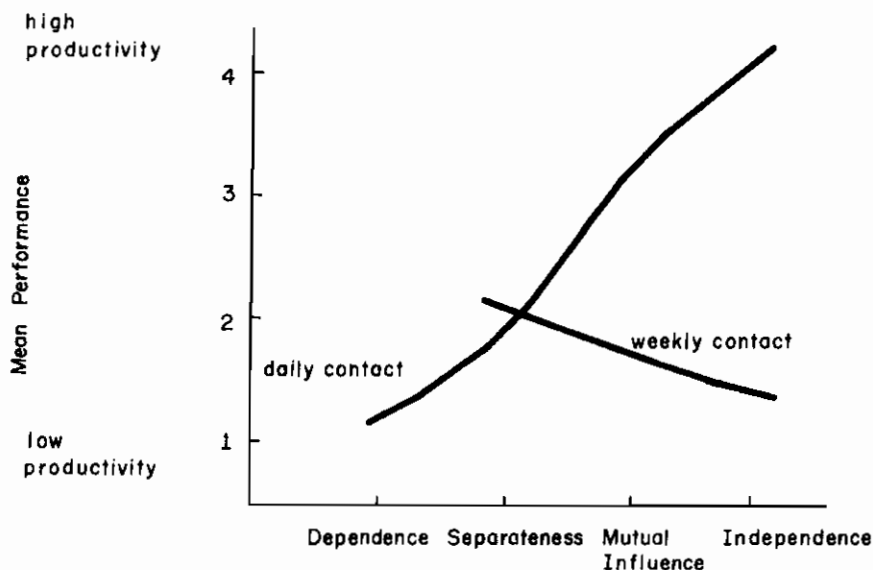


Fig. 1 - Decisionmaking Freedom

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also for getting the job done—serve both as insurance to the middle manager and as tools for the supervisor.²⁶ There is little return to the ship in the form of useful maintenance data being provided by the 3-M system. Maintenance data printouts are returned weeks late and not in a useful format. Consequently, this reporting system does not achieve its measurable goals, and productivity is not enhanced.

Taking a Round Turn on the Reports System

The top levels of naval management in Washington are acutely aware of former Secretary of Defense Laird's direction in reducing redundant paperwork. The Naval Records Management Bureau (NRMB), under the Assistant Vice Chief of Naval Operations, Director of Naval Administration, has been assigned the responsibility for developing and coordinating the reports management program.²⁷ As of this writing, the impact of the NRMB on the proliferation of ship reports has been negligible; however, it is quite possible that the NRMB has served as a buffer to additional reporting requirements. Also, the NRMB's jurisdiction is limited as its charter restricts its review of recurring reporting requirements to Washington agencies.

The NRMB does participate in Inspector General (IG) inspections to ensure that reports management programs are being implemented. To date, the NRMB has maintained a consistently low profile in managing fleet reporting requirements. The right and privilege of line or agency managers to request from ships the information needed to perform a decision role is not questioned. The method of control presently in effect to provide this information, however, requires review, modification, and improvement. In other words, the control model requires

Controlling the Model. The Navy's problem in controlling the growth of required reports is hardly unique. There is a classic textbook solution suggested in the management handbook *Systems and Procedures* by Victor Lazzaro.²⁸ The system suggested requires:

- All new reports reviewed by authority with written justification and preparation instruction.

- All new reports to be checked with functional file for duplication.

- All new reporting procedures to be reviewed for simplification.

- Assign control numbers.

- Assign costs.

A caveat appended to this list by Mr. Lazzaro noted that even under rigidly controlled systems, paperwork often begets more paperwork because ambiguous, inaccurate, or tardy records foster explanatory or corrective documents. When paperwork is uncontrolled, clerical empires quickly form and the ornate, overlapping, complicated routines become custom.

Two report control systems are suggested for large and small organizations. The first is to analyze existing procedures and weed out the duplicated or unnecessary steps. This approach also requires review of the organizational policies that led to the volumes of useless information. This clean break approach is a work revolution and appears to be the task of NRMB. The second approach, called work simplification, improves paperwork piecemeal, by constantly chipping away at ingrained, obsolete routines. This appears to be the duty of middle and lower echelon management personnel such as type and unit commander staffs. Such a textbook approach has direct application to naval reporting procedures.

The NRMB appears to be developing into an administrative reports system "czar." However, a Pentagon agency has little control of fleet reporting practices because of the intervening multitiered command structure. To gain attention,

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this command structure must be literally kicked in the shins.

Oddly enough, in the field of management controls, there are scarcely any accepted principles, and the "specialists" appear to work by intuition or folklore. Generalizations have failed to develop into perfected control models,²⁹ and the methods, once articulated, will doubtless be innovative and invite institutional resistance.

Pricing the Information. Information in the Navy has always been free to anyone in the upper echelons making demands on the ship. But if the information is genuinely important to the claimant, then the information has a value that can be translated into man-hour dollars. Naval Safety Center accident reports, for example, each require about 8 hours of officer preparation, review, and yeoman clerical time. At a flat rate of \$6 per hour, such a report costs \$48. The Safety Center should be obligated to pay the ship, through the type commander, an OPTAR transfer of \$48 for each report received. The requesting agency will soon learn the value of sampling techniques or exception reporting to develop data banks for decisionmaking.

A precedent does exist for this cost application method. In July 1973 the Deputy Secretary of Defense directed an inventory of interagency reports as a basis for reimbursement.³⁰ Rejustification for internal requirements was required as well as vigorous questioning of external requirements. The General Services Administration acted as a clearing house and licensing agency prior to the levy of the interagency reporting requirement. Investment figures (report costs) were determined by GSA, to be paid by interagency fund transfers. Specific report reductions were not established, but reductions in data and information requirements are to be reported to the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Operations) in June 1974. This

round turn by DOD on Washington agencies has great potential for the fleet.

Reports Control Methodology

Socrates had a "demon," an inner voice, that whispered, Take care before making major decisions. When a decision is neither pleasant nor popular nor easy, both courage and judgment are needed. Mr. Drucker compared bad tasting, but effective medicine to distasteful decisions which are most effective. Continuation of the present reporting system would only aggravate the communications barrier between the generalist ship operator and the specialist ashore and wall off any sense of immediacy or action.³¹ A Chief of Naval Operations policy statement on reports management is needed to codify servicewide changes with a minimum of disruption. With the support of the Atlantic and Pacific Fleet Commanders, the type commanders' function as the sole administrative commander for ships should be affirmed. As a control methodology, the symbolized reporting control system could serve as a licensing control number. By type commander

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Lt. Comdr. Thomas S. Tollefsen earned his bachelor's degree in nautical science from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, holds an engineering science degree from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School,

and is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Destroyer School. He has wide and varied duty in destroyers, the most recent as executive officer of the U.S.S. *Damato* (DD-871), has served as Commander River Division 541 in Vietnam (1966-67), as an instructor in the Amphibious School, Little Creek, Va., and as a staff officer on Commander Cruiser/Destroyer Flotilla 8. Lieutenant Commander Tollefsen is currently a student in the College of Naval Command and Staff.

edict, no reports would be submitted without prior licensing after a careful annual review of alternate methods and ship time budgets. The type commander would assign chargeable costs to each report for ships to pass on to agencies requesting information on a one-time or recurring basis.

An annual review of licensed reports would be conducted by the NRMB, working with the Navy Inspector General. The Navy Inspector General reviews the various type commanders for compliance with CNO policy. This expansion of his usual material inspection and police role could be aided by the Fleet Commander's administrative assist team which would provide regular information to the Inspector General and the Fleet Commander in the reports area.

Alternative Method. An alternative to the costed licensing system is a man-hour analysis of requirements to support the present system. Where man-hour deficiencies are recognized, additional clerical and administrative personnel would be assigned to ships to satisfy the requirements. This, however, is not the preferred solution as the salary supporting costs would soon skyrocket. The key is to reduce the reporting requirements to the existent manning level of the ships. To do this, the "kick in the shins" concept of cost-licensing would be most effective, especially if supplemented with an abbreviated education program for ship and staff officers about the management principles guiding the program.

Beneficial Effects of Controlled Administrative Procedures. A reports management system that is effective will have productive fallout for the ship operator. The most experienced and

knowledgeable ship personnel, free of the unnecessary clerical burden, would have time to teach, train, and prepare their crews for the ship warfare mission. The benefits of canceling each report would also be multiplied since countless daily feeder reports are also eliminated.³² Best of all, eyeball contact would be increased between those submitting and receiving reports. Key people on the ship would have the freedom to get out around the working and living areas to relate daily to the technicians, supervisors, and junior officers.

As the effect of costed information becomes felt within the naval bureaucracy, the efficacy and usefulness of exception reporting will be realized. Regular operating costs and data can be estimated or retrieved from data files. Management should be interested in taking lessons from better or worse than expected conditions, reported only by exception. Sampling theory also requires emphasis in the fleet as the 5 percent sample report does yield worthwhile and useful information.

* * * * *

The naval officer, much like his civilian managerial counterpart, must look to ways of increasing officer and crew member productivity to meet the mission requirements of the organization. An effective first step is education in fundamental management principles, price of information, penalty costs, opportunity loss, and reporting methods that emphasize exception reporting techniques and sampling theories. A viable reports control management method will go far in restoring our professional image and enhancing combat readiness.

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NOTES

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3. R.H. Ballard, ed., "Report Preparation and Record Maintenance Requirements Aboard Atlantic Fleet Destroyers," Work Study Report Number 87 (Norfolk: Navy Manpower and Material Analysis Center, Atlantic, 28 November 1972), p. ix-7.
4. *Ibid.*, p. ix-6.
5. Peter Drucker, *The Effective Executive* (New York: Harper & Row), p. 29. Mr. Drucker estimates that to write an effective report requires 6 to 8 hours for the first draft.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
7. Sune Carlson, *Executive Behavior* (Stockholm: Shomberg, 1951), p. 78.
8. David A. Kolb, ed., *Organizational Psychology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 74. Time deadline reports received priority attention by 43 out of 52 managers during a recent management study.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
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12. Kolb, p. 240.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 238; and Robert N. Anthony, *Planning and Control Systems: a Framework for Analysis* (Boston: Harvard Graduate School, 1965), p. 15. A conjugate principle is a pair of principles mutually contradicting, yet each is true under some conditions.
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24. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
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29. Anthony, p. 12.
30. W.P. Clement, *Inventory and Review of Information Requirements*. A promulgated Deputy Secretary of Defense memorandum (Washington: 19 July 1973).
31. Elting E. Morison, *Men, Machines and Modern Times* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), p. 52.
32. Lazzaro, p. 148.

Ψ

Paper-work will ruin any military force.

Lewis B. Puller: Marine, 1962