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# Assessing Navy Flag-Level Command Transitions: Commanders, Command Teams, and Effectiveness

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Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School

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## NPS NRP Executive Summary

Title: Assessing Executive Leadership Development for Effective Command Transitions:  
Leaders, Leadership, Teams and Command Resources  
Report Date: 10/14/19 Project Number (IREF ID): NPS-19-N347-A  
Naval Postgraduate School / Center for Executive Education



NAVAL RESEARCH PROGRAM  
NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

# ASSESSING EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FOR EFFECTIVE COMMAND TRANSITIONS: LEADERS, LEADERSHIP, TEAMS AND COMMAND RESOURCES

Executive Summary Type: Final Report  
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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

#### **Project Summary**

There are large literatures of research and publications related to management succession planning, talent management, promotions, and the many issues of manpower or Human Resources, and some research focuses on high-level Navy officer development. However, there is little or no systematic research that focuses on the needs and lived experiences of those who go through flag-level command transitions. Our research is designed to identify factors that facilitate or impede the mission alignment and effectiveness in the command transition processes; its final goal is a normative model for flag-level command transitions. Transitional issues addressed in the O-6 to O-7 (i.e. Navy captain to one-star admiral) transition, challenges of managing civilians, and political context (e.g., D.C.). Three approaches to defining effectiveness—in terms of transition goals, internal command transition processes, and stakeholders of the transition—are discussed. In phase 1, reported here, we use content analysis of interviews with 8 admirals, 3 senior level command members, and 2 Senior Executive Service (SES) members in order to identify success factors associated with the incoming commander, the command, and their institutional context and environment.

The current suggestive findings show the following at the commander's level: cautions against rapid, less-reflective, action-oriented styles, especially in more complex or political contexts (e.g., D.C.) and the importance of empowering (and giving trust) assessing risk and maintaining accountability. These results show that at the command level, a culture of trust (or mistrust) may well be the dominant moderating factor. At the institutional level, crisis and pressures driven by the larger manpower system, create a context and history that commanders and teams must understand and navigate. Additionally, types of transitions (fleet-up, direct inject, and gapped transitions) reveal the importance of time and commander familiarity as pervasive factors. Phase two of our research will serve to validate findings and saturate a theoretical model. Phase three will apply the proposed theoretical model, and phase four refines the model for instrumentation.

**Keywords:** United States Navy, admirals, flag-level officers, command transitions, leadership transitions, leadership development, flag-level transitions

#### **Background**

Research regarding developing senior Navy leaders has primarily been done at a macro, policy level (Hanser, et al., 2008). In order to bridge the gap in terms of command transitions, we inductively surface and analyzed themes that emerge from interviews, in order to build a middle-range theoretical model that can guide teams, commanders, and

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educators to better understand and navigate facilitators and challenges of command transitions.

Emergent themes will guide engaging the intersecting literatures on leadership and group dynamics in organizations (e.g., theories of empowerment, reputational effectiveness, and initial trust formation) that have implications and promise for understanding and action.

For example, phase one of our research suggests the following conjunctions of constructs are promising for such a model:

- The commander's development and communication of vision as it relates to individual empowerment through a sense of purpose.
- The commander's speed of action, assessment of talent and risks, and delegation patterns directly affect a culture of trust.
- The challenges posed by learning the positional aspects of being an admiral (a new one star) or moving to higher level, in more strategically-oriented executive ranks.
- The challenges of managing and leading a civilian workforce, especially in more complex or political contexts (e.g., the interagency, combined, or domestic policy level contexts).

### **Findings and Conclusions**

We conducted thirteen elite interviews, 50 to 75 minutes in length, of 8 flag officers (admirals) ranging from O-7 through O-10, 3 flag staff members (i.e., 2 captains and one commander), and 2 SES members in shore commands. The interview questions were broad, and elicited interviewees' experiences focusing on previous Navy flag-level command transitions and their perception of the factors that made them more or less successful. Transcripts were prepared, and two coders collaborated to code and analyze the data, looking for the most frequent themes as well as conjunctions or correlations of constructs. At this stage of the research, we included infrequent themes that appeared important, insightful, and worth following up on in future research (e.g., diversity and inclusion, and which upward transitions in career rank provided the greatest value for the development of commanders). Preliminary findings were organized by levels of analysis.

Findings at the level of the institution that form the context of the command include:

- The important differences in the three types of transitions, which are fleet-up (generally regarded as best for facilitating familiarity), direct inject, and gapped transitions (generally regarded as the most difficult).
- How levels of thinking and command—tactical, operational and strategic—explicitly and implicitly permeate those of interviewees (e.g., strategic levels are associated more with diverse stakeholders and more reflective, less action-oriented leadership styles).
- The importance of understanding the command's history and how immediate conditions, particularly crises, are impacting the command and its reputation.

Findings related to the command team and developing the team include:

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- The centrality of a culture of trust and team confidence as indicators of the effectiveness of transitions.
- The degree to which mistrust among divisions and people can come to dominate the commander's thinking and communication challenges.

Findings related to the commander include:

- The importance of communicating an informed vision for alignment and empowerment.
- The challenges of leading and giving trust to civilians (vs. military) and how this can impact productivity and morale.
- The importance of balancing and managing trust, accountability, and risk assessments.

In addition, we discuss three approaches for effectiveness of transition: a goal-based approach (setting and accomplishing goals, sometimes mentioned with respect to vision), an internal process approach (e.g., trust and morale), and a stakeholders' approach (more characteristic of complex, political, and higher-level commands).

This research is qualitative and seeks insights that can surface factors for generating a theoretical model. Further research is planned to validate the findings and construct a theoretical model.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This phase of the research provides a proof of concept for design and findings, and future research is suggested to "unpack" and dig deeper into relationships like those between a culture of trust, empowerment of individuals, cognitive style of commanders, and risk assessment in the context of delegation. As the force field interpretations become more clearly understood, and as more specificity is added about them, they will become more useful for commanders and commands in creating more effective transitions. These can then be used by those who provide support in the form of formal training and education, command workshops, and coaching and mentoring.

In addition to the contributions to practice, there are possibilities for contributions to more general scholarship: for example, the literature on "initial trust formation" and on "reputational effectiveness" could be brought together. This study already suggests that key factors come together in ways that have not been studied in terms of transitioning into leadership positions. For instance, how do the intricacies of effective delegation, risk assessment, empowerment and the development of trust actually relate in the perceptions of people, and can this be operationalized and measured? How do people form judgments of reputational effectiveness? Qualitative research on command transitions in the Navy, including interview studies such as this one and case studies of specific transitions told from multiple points of view, have the potential to address a wide range of questions.

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### **References**

Hanser, L. M., Miller, L. W., Shukiar, H. J., Newsome, B. (2008). *Developing Senior Navy Leaders: Requirements for flag officer expertise today and in the future*. Santa Monica, CA.: RAND.

### **Acronyms**

SES Senior Executive Service