

# WHAT FEEDBACK AND COACHING DO JUNIOR NAVAL OFFICERS NEED?

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*This research identified crucial knowledge and skills that coaches or mentors should help Junior Officers develop in early stages of their careers. The initial phase involved interviews with subject matter experts and experienced officers to determine important attributes for junior officers' success. The research team then held focus group meetings with officers who were at various career milestones. Participants in the focus groups identified important skills that junior officers need to develop, and they shared ideas about making feedback and coaching more effective. Beyond navigation and other technical skills, participants indicated that leadership skills such as motivation, communication, and relation management are qualities of successful officers. Results suggest that better coaching in these areas could improve junior officers' competencies, with implications for the culture and future effectiveness of the services.*

**Key words:** *Junior officers, skill-building, coaching, officer competencies*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Training and retention of military officers is crucial for the continuity and success of each military service. The U.S. Navy has identified several important attributes that help modern Junior Officers (JO) succeed. These include leadership competencies, technical expertise, and personal qualities related to character, ethics, and teamwork (Naval Education and Training Command, n.d.). The U.S. Army Center for Junior Officers provides resources for JOs to develop their leadership and decision-making abilities, as well as

more specific knowledge about jobs and roles. The Center emphasizes several characteristics that junior officers should develop, including transformational leadership (Plenge, n.d.a) and ability to make sound decisions under conditions of extreme uncertainty (Plenge, n.d.b). Successful Junior Officers have skills to support mission accomplishment, leading people and change, collaborating with people, and stewarding resources (DIVOLD, 2023).

Unfortunately, opportunities for Junior Officer mentoring and

development are not consistent across branches of military and within particular communities. For example, the U.S. Navy has low retention of Naval Warfare Officers (officers whose main job is aboard ships). Instead of addressing root problems that led people to go elsewhere, the Navy began commissioning nearly twice as many ensigns as it needed aboard ships to address historically low retention rates of first term contract officers. The excess personnel were then assigned to share positions or find their own place aboard ship, requiring “these newbies to compete for ship driving time or other hands-on experience needed to be a good warfare officer” (Ziezulewicz, 2021). This inconsistent training can contribute to poor performance and ascorbate retention attrition. Only 33 percent of JOs remain in the community after a decade of service, compared to 45 percent of officers in other Navy communities (U.S. GAO, 2021). This situation aboard ships is a particularly egregious problem for effectiveness and retention, but more individualized coaching could be valuable to develop junior officer competencies across the breadth of military services and professions.

This study identifies key areas of learning and skill development that junior officers must achieve to be competent in their roles aboard

Navy ships. Results were intended to inform training and coaching efforts by more senior Navy personnel.

### **1.1.General Expectations of Junior Officers**

Following high-profile accidents at sea, military leaders reassessed foundational issues in the Naval Warfare community, identifying weakness in essential areas such as seamanship, watch- standing skills, teamwork, operational safety, evaluations, and professional culture (Adams, 2018). Many leaders recommended interventions to improve the Navy’s at-sea competence.

Admirals Mullen and Natter (2018) focused on junior officer competencies, arguing that higher-quality training is necessary to “fix the JO career path.” In particular, they emphasized seafaring and warfighting skills that are best learned through on-the-job training that builds practical skills and tacit knowledge, which they term “the sixth sense.” About the same time, the Surface Warfare Officer Requirements Document (SWORD) was written to “define the competencies of a Junior Naval Warfare Officer during career progression from first tour Officer to Major Commander” (COMNAVSURFORINST 1412.4A, 2018). The document

establishes milestones for Junior Warriors to build technical knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) throughout their careers. It outlines the expectations and core competencies for Junior Warfare Officers (JOs) at five key career milestones: Junior Officer (0-1 to 0-3), Department Head (0-4), Executive Officer (0-5), Commanding Officer (0-5), and Major Commander (0-6). Specific competency areas include “Fight the Ship, Drive the Ship, Manage the Ship, and Command the Ship.” It is worth noting that this document heavily emphasizes technical know-how that can be learned aboard a ship, via simulations, or in formal education. Leadership skills are largely outside the scope of the document.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2021) provided a comprehensive evaluation and noted that the U.S. Navy JO career paths deviate significantly from those in other navies. For example, the U.S. JOs are expected to become generalists, serving on various ships and in various roles, without developing high levels of proficiency in any particular role or ship. In contrast, many military services develop specialists in particular types of jobs, ships, or both. The report indicated that there is a need for improvements in training

and evaluation, with the intent to improve proficiency and increase retention. Strong partnerships with senior enlisted personnel can support Junior Officer success, including frequent communication, mutual respect, willingness to learn, and alignment of goals and expectations (Talbot, 2020). Training during deployment is intended to build these crucial skills, but this often fails to occur.

### **1.2.A 360° Coaching Program for Junior Officers in The U.S. Navy**

The U.S. Navy has a specialized learning initiative that aims to improve the leadership and operational abilities of naval officers in surface warfare positions. This program, conducted by the Surface Warfare Officers School Command (SWOSCOM), offers a comprehensive and structured approach to developing skills and knowledge in various cognitive domains. To support these efforts, instructors, mentors, and coaches need to understand the relative importance of different kinds of know-how for junior officers. The program collects assessments from bosses, peers, self, and subordinates (called 360 assessments) about how each junior officer is performing, and the school uses this feedback as a foundation for coaching. This process can help early-career JOs to understand

their strengths and weaknesses because it provides feedback from multiple sources about everyone's skills, competencies, and behaviors (London & Smither, 2002). With this information, the time and resources spent in the development of JOs can be focused and more effective aboard ship and ashore. This project gathered information about what kinds of knowledge and skills the young officers should be developing. Results were intended to inform 360-degree assessment and coaching efforts. Well-trained coaches can then help each person understand the feedback and set personal goals for professional development.

## 2. METHODS

The work began with qualitative inputs from subject matter experts about attributes that are crucial for a young officer's success. The research team interviewed ten post command officers to obtain a broad perspective on knowledge and behaviors that should be addressed.

Finally, the team held focus group meetings with Navy personnel at various milestones in their careers. Before the meetings, participants were asked to complete a pre-survey rating the importance of a variety of knowledge and skills that are mentioned in the SWORD.

### 2.1. Interviews with Experts

We began by interviewing people who have extensive experience as Naval officers or trainers. The interviewers invited respondents to share whatever knowledge or skills are most important for Junior Officers.

### 2.2. Focus Groups

Focus group meetings were held at the Naval Postgraduate School and at the Surface Warfare Officer School. Participants at the Naval Postgraduate School were mid-level officers. Participants at SWOCOM were selected to represent all levels from Ensigns (0-1 to 0-3) receiving their first coaching to experienced coaches working at SWOCOM. The groups were sorted according to rank, and the questions were open enough to allow participants to share their thoughts about the need and process of developing knowledge and skills that are necessary for success as Junior Officers.

In total, the researchers conducted eight focus group meetings about necessary skills and knowledge for Division Officers. Seven were held at SWOSCOM in Newport Rhode Island and one at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS). These included a group of JO master's degree students (at NPS), two groups of new Junior Officers, two groups of Department Heads, two Prospective

Executive Officer (PXO) groups, and one group of more senior officers.

Before joining the focus group meetings, participants were asked to complete a pre-survey. Prior to the focus group meetings at SWOSCOM, we sent a brief survey to participants, asking them to assess the importance of 18 JO-specific competencies at the Junior Officer level. These competencies were drawn from the SWORD (Naval Education and Training Command, n.d.). This enabled us to capture quantitative measures alongside the qualitative discussions that we held onsite at SWOSCOM.

### 2.2.1. Pre-survey variables

The pre-survey was conducted using Qualtrics. Variables measured in the pre-survey, including a term followed by the definition, appear below. For each item, respondents were asked how important each type of knowledge is for a junior officer, on a one to five Likert scale, and if the definition provided adequately explained the concept.

- *Drive the Ship*

Navigation: Uses available information to determine the ship's position, plan courses, and track progress and recommend course corrections as appropriate.

Seamanship: Demonstrates a basic understanding of routine ship operations, customs and courtesies,

roles and responsibilities, equipment, weather, and maritime terminology.

Ship handling: Knows and anticipates how a ship behaves and what orders should be given to make the ship move correctly.

- *Manage the Ship*

Maintenance & Material Management, Engineering: Understands how to plan, schedule, and execute maintenance requirements to meet ship's standards.

Damage Control: Knows how to maintain and use appropriate equipment and procedures to prevent or minimize damage caused by adverse situations on the ship.

Combat Systems: Understands systems and procedures used to enhance situational awareness, facilitate planning and decision-making; and ensure proper command and control of weapon systems.

Supply Management: Understands how supplies and equipment are ordered, purchased, stored, and distributed on the ship in support of operations.

- *Fight the Ship*

Naval Warfare: Understands how maritime threats to the ship are detected, interdicted, and destroyed.

Ballistic Missile Defense: Understands how radar and ship missile systems are used to intercept external missile threats.

**Electronic Warfare:** Understands how electromagnetic and directed energy systems are used to identify and defend the ship.

**Undersea Warfare:** Understands the strategic, operational, and tactical use of undersea systems.

**Air Warfare:** Understands active and passive actions used to neutralize or destroy enemy air threats in the maritime domain.

**Amphibious Warfare:** Understands how amphibious ships operate close to shore when launching and supporting land-based operations.

• *Command the Ship*

**Knowledge of Navy Regulations:** Knows where to find required information in relevant manuals, regulations, and instructions.

**Professional Development Training and Scheduling:** Ensures people they lead complete necessary training and tracks training status using appropriate systems.

**Leadership & Management:** Be a good example of virtue, honor, patriotism, and fairness and ensure personnel assigned to you always demonstrate appropriate behavior.

**Organization & Command Structure:** Uses Ship Organization Regulation Manual guidance to organize and execute duties as assigned.

**Planning, Briefing, Executing, Debriefing, Operational Risk**

**Management, Safety:** Creates environments in which people they lead are trained and motivated to safely accomplish their jobs.

### 3. RESULTS

This section of the report presents qualitative information related to important competencies and coaching for Junior Officers. To identify needed competencies, we begin by summarizing findings from a prior study about shipboard mentoring. Then we report the results of interviews with active and retired Navy Captains, as well as Naval Warfare leaders, about qualities that make Junior Officers successful. Finally, we summarize results from focus groups held to identify important competencies to address in 360 reviews and coaching of Junior Officers.

#### 3.1. Concerns about Junior Officer Training and Mentoring

Junior Officers have expressed concerns about the training culture and practices in their community for several years. With Sailors and officers as busy as they are on ships, many indicate that Naval officer training is rushed and does not ensure that Junior Officers acquire the foundations they need to become future expert mariners and leaders. Junior Officers have highlighted box-checking rather

than ensuring thorough training, lack of accountability in understanding qualification requirements, prioritization of work over qualifications, perceived lack of rigor in earning the Naval Warfare Officer designation badge, and difficulties in conducting training due to organizational constraints (Crawford, Bowman & Hatch, 2011). In this study, some senior officers expressed a desire to revive positive aspects of the Navy's culture, emphasizing leadership and motivation. There was good training onboard some ships, but on the majority of the ships visited, personnel were stressed, frustrated, questioning the quality of junior officer training, and – in the minds of some – concerned for the future of the surface Navy.

Many junior officers and their seniors indicated that the junior officers often learn from someone who has only been in the job 6 months longer and may pass down incorrect beliefs. Mentoring by more experienced people could help with this, but very few junior officers reported having high caliber mentors. As one said, “There is no vested interest in our community for mentoring and helping us to advance in our qualifications. It’s not like other communities. We do a disservice to our future COs.” Many thought that the Naval Warfare Badge does not mean much due to

the lack of rigor in the training, and they expressed interest in better mentoring that would not become another check-the-box.

### **3.2. SWOSCOM Leaders**

SWOSCOM leaders indicated that the 360 feedback should focus on leadership, relationships, and professionalism. Based on their lengthy experience, JOs varied significantly in their competencies in these areas, and coaching could be valuable to help them improve their skills.

#### **3.2.1. Navy Captains: What Makes a Successful Junior Officer?**

During the Spring of 2022, the researchers interviewed four Naval warfare officers who had attained the rank of Navy Captain. Two were still on active duty and the others had retired from the Navy and taken civilian jobs within the Department of Defense. We asked for their frank assessments of requirements for developmental feedback at the Junior Officer level.

Key questions included:

1. Pleasethink of a junior officer who was a top performer and model JO, in your view. What were the most important skills, competencies, or behaviors that made this person so effective as a Junior Naval Warfare officer?

2. Now think of a Junior Naval division officer who was *not* effective. What deficiencies in knowledge, competence, or behavior contributed to the officer's poor performance?
3. What 5–6 competencies or characteristics do you look for prior to deciding if a JO is ready to qualify as a Naval Warfare Officer?

These senior officers identified several important skills, competencies, or behaviors that make a Naval Warfare officer effective. Key areas of expertise included leadership and management, professional knowledge including tactical competency, and character. For example, an active-duty Navy captain recommended that early coaching should address the following: "Is the leader honest, will he or she be forthright? [Do they demonstrate] approachability, empathy, emotional intelligence (but not that phrase in the 360). Integrity is a non-negotiable leadership skill.

Communication. Do people see them as honest, forthright, approachable, a part of the team, not just out for themselves? Operational effectiveness without leaving human wreckage in their wake, effective without destroying the team."

Asked what are the attributes of good leadership, the active-duty

Captain replied:

"The longer I'm in this business, the more I realize how important people's emotions are... Some people say, 'hey do this thing,' and others who are more effective want to understand why or there may be something else going on that prevents them from doing just that... People have feelings, and those really matter to mission accomplishment but also to their ability to be part of the team..."

The SWORD includes 300 pages of spreadsheet items that are universal competencies that are desirable. How do you distill that down into something realistic? For a young JO, the most important thing is the navigation and ship handling, which applies to every ship. The leadership piece, both on the watch team and the divisional level. And the other thing is being really good at what you have been assigned to do.

Another thing, can you collaborate with your peers and make an informal team of people who can help you and you can help? Informal connections and communication. The biggest value of the 360 to the individual is [feedback on non-tangible competencies such as] "you're really good at talking people through problems. Or you need to look out when you say x because it puts people off."

A retired captain, now teaching at a Naval college, emphasized qualities such as diligence and comprehension in carrying out responsibilities. He argued that timeliness, thoroughness, and reliability reflect holistic development, and successful officers understand what people in their divisions do. “When personnel issues arise you get glimpses of the officers who engage well with their senior enlisted leadership, with chiefs and petty officers dealing with junior enlisted personnel. You get an impression of some who do not engage well with their senior enlisted leadership... Leadership is important to develop as a junior officer, but the circumstances are different in different jobs with different troops.” This professor also emphasized trustworthiness and taking initiative rather than waiting to be told that something needs attention.

Another active-duty captain argued that a successful officer needs to have quick decision-making skills, which involve rapidly evaluating and assimilating information, along with critical thinking. He said that some people may struggle as leaders due to personal ego issues, but collaboration and teamwork are essential, and conflicts between competent individuals must be managed to ensure smooth operations. He emphasized the

importance of treating people with respect and having a good relationship with others. Finally, he explained that understanding ship handling and tactics, knowing the ship, and being trainable in these areas are crucial. Summarizing, he said that “three-quarters of being a Naval Warfare Officer is being a good junior officer: can you lead sailors, can you manage equipment, can you manage maintenance, can you somewhat manage a budget?”

Finally, a retired captain working as a professor of military operations research emphasized knowledge, trust, and judgment, with demonstrable ability to keep the crew and ship safe. He cautioned against expecting too much of people so early in their military careers.

### **3.3. Focus Groups Conducted at Surface Warfare Officers School Command**

#### *● Focus Group Pre-survey*

Thirty participants completed the pre-survey, assessing the importance of technical skills for Junior Officers using a 1 to 5 Likert scale. Average ratings for all items appear in Table 1.

Most notably, respondents ascribed the greatest importance to competencies in driving the ship and managing the ship, and the least importance to competencies related to fighting the ship.

**Table 1.** Importance of Junior Naval Warfare Officer-specific Competencies for Junior Officer Success

Average Importance	Category and Specific Competencies
4.75	Navigation
4.46	Seamanship
4.86	Ship handling
	Manage the Ship
4.04	Maintenance & Material Management, Engineering
4.00	Damage Control
4.57	Combat Systems
3.54	Supply Management
	Fight the Ship
4.07	Surface Warfare
3.00	Ballistic Missile Defense
3.32	Electronic Warfare
3.33	Undersea Warfare
3.68	Air Warfare
3.03	Amphibious Warfare
	Command the Ship
3.82	Knowledge of Navy Regulations
3.96	Professional Development Training and Scheduling
4.36	Leadership & Management
3.54	Organization & Command Structure
4.00	Planning, Briefing, Executing, Debrief PBED, ORM, Safety

- *Focus Group Discussion Results*

Each focus group lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. Themes from these sessions are summarized below and accompanied by representative comments. Findings are presented regardless of resource implications or other circumstances.

Focus group participants generally agreed that Junior Officers have limited opportunities to engage with undersea warfare or ballistic missiles, but they must understand navigation, ship handling, leadership, and combat systems in general. Frequently mentioned topics for Junior Officer feedback included integrating information from multiple sources, communicating clearly, and applying what they have learned to real situations. Members of all groups recommended feedback about leadership behaviors, ranging from conflict management and emotional self-control to demonstrating integrity and inspiring confidence. Many emphasized the importance of working effectively with senior enlisted personnel and other functional groups aboard ship. More senior participants talked about understanding the big picture aboard ship and developing positive interpersonal skills. The junior participants expressed more confusion about what is really expected, and many seemed disappointed by the lack of learning

opportunities they had experienced thus far.

The master's students came from a variety of backgrounds. Some remembered their Junior Officer 360 assessment, and many had since completed 360 reviews for subordinates or peers. Thoughts on the process varied. One person had received detailed coaching about specific areas to work on, while others could not recall receiving any coaching at all. Areas of emphasis for this group included management of people and resources. One person valued "understanding the equipment we have on the bridge and then understanding the roles and capabilities of the people." Another participant explained that Junior Naval Warfare Officers need to develop skills in "teamwork and coordination, because it's basically effectively managing everyone that's on your watch up there with you." This group helped our team fine-tune the wording for questions about technical skills that are outlined in the SWORD.

AJOC groups reported vastly different experiences aboard ship, some positive and excited about continuing their JO careers, others discouraged and intending to leave the Navy as soon as possible. Several lacked information about the purpose of 360 assessments. Some hoped to receive developmental information from their coach, but

others anticipated that “they’ll just tell us how much we suck.” Some of the people had experienced criticism aboard ship without explanations or mentoring about how to improve. For example, one young man said “I didn’t trust the command to give me proper feedback. They shuffled me around, saying that I was struggling in my first job, and it was news to me. I went on to a second tour, and I asked, ‘was I doing bad’, and they said no. None of them gave me feedback about what they wanted. I think it was style over substance that they wanted.”

Members of the AJOC groups indicated that they need truthful feedback, “usable and timely.” They recommended gathering feedback about leadership competencies and consistency. Several asked for specific guidance about areas to improve, such as “What is the one thing from this JO that is their greatest weakness and what steps could they take to improve?” and “What parts of the JO’s job (admin, management, etc.) need improvement and what should they work on?” Others talked about explosive or inattentive commanding officers, and many emphasized the importance of providing feedback about how the person handles stress and treats their sailors. Some emphasized trustworthiness in accomplishing tasks, others

emphasized trustworthiness in making good decisions, and still others focused on interpersonal trust.

Department Heads emphasized leadership, management, and professional development of others as key areas to be assessed. Specific themes revolved around leadership qualities, relationship-building, effective management, communication skills, decision-making abilities, and fostering a culture of trust and development within the team. When asked what types of feedback could increase the value of the 360 assessments, some said that useful feedback is actionable, with specific steps for improvement, and it helps people anticipate second and third order effects. Others emphasized professional development with guidance on how to enhance one's skills. Overall, the Department Heads valued people skills and recommended coaching that would enable Junior Officers to identify specific areas for improvement and would provide guidance on how to go about it.

The Prospective Executive Officers talked extensively about providing a good example, being attuned to the well-being of people in their group, and ensure personnel assigned to you always demonstrate appropriate behavior. The PCOs

emphasized systems thinking and communication. A successful Junior Officer “knows how the various information systems coordinate and is able to extract the necessary information when needed,” and “takes coordination time into account when giving commands.” The PCOs recommended providing feedback about how well the junior officers apply knowledge to their jobs. One asked “do they understand the ship and drive the ship tactically in the environment, do they understand what is going on?” Another questioned “can they apply what they know to the real world?”. With regard to communication, the PCOs stated that communication, both written and verbal, needs to be discussed. Particular issues included speaking to a group, providing feedback, motivating action, showing empathy, and delivering bad news.

### **3.4. Summary of Results**

The numeric responses on pre-surveys rated ship-driving, understanding of combat systems, and leadership as most important. The discussion groups provided details particularly about crucial navigation, leadership, and combat skills. Necessary areas of feedback included integrating information from multiple sources, clear communication, and applying

learned skills to real situations. Leadership behaviors such as conflict management, emotional self-control, integrity, and inspiring confidence were highlighted. Senior participants emphasized understanding the big picture and developing interpersonal skills, while junior participants expressed confusion about expectations and disappointment with learning opportunities.

Participants who had recently completed the coaching process reported varied experiences with 360 assessments and on-the-job training, highlighting the need for truthful, timely feedback and specific guidance for improvement. Department Heads and prospective Executive Officers emphasized leadership, management, communication skills, decision-making, and fostering a culture of trust. They valued actionable feedback and professional development guidance, stressing the importance of understanding and applying knowledge practically.

## **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study identified crucial knowledge and skills that merit feedback and coaching for junior officers. Senior officers identified key skills and behaviors essential for a Junior Naval Warfare officer’s

effectiveness, including leadership, management, professional knowledge, and character. It is important to point out that these are general skills and behaviors, so they also apply to the Air Force and the Army. The research emphasized integrity, communication, empathy, and emotional intelligence. Effective leaders are honest, approachable, and team-oriented, balancing operational effectiveness with team well-being. Officers must be diligent, reliable, and capable of quick decision-making. Building informal peer networks and receiving feedback on non-tangible competencies are vital. Trustworthiness, initiative, and respect for others are crucial for successful leadership and smooth operations. While some JOs have these qualities before they join the military, others need good role models, feedback from commanding officers, peers and subordinates. They all need coaching to improve their weaknesses and build on their strengths.

#### **4.1. Implications for Future Force Development**

Participants identified a broad range of characteristics for which junior officers need feedback and coaching. Many of these characteristics pertain to all military organizations, including

communication, conflict management and trust-building, leadership and management, decision-making, and technical know-how. Those who had been through the formal coaching process recently highlighted the value of honest, timely feedback and specific improvement guidance. It was clear that existing on-the-job training and coaching have helped some people, but other JOs felt unclear about expectations and disappointed by a lack of learning opportunities. Some of these expressed a desire to leave military service as soon as possible. This disparity in on-the-job training, feedback, and coaching reveals a strong need for systematic intervention. The SWOSCOM program endeavors to provide this support for every JO. Similar programs for JOs in other militaries could likewise benefit from 360-degree feedback and coaching about their know-how and leadership behaviors.

Countries with all-volunteer militaries have the further challenge of recruiting new soldiers, sailors, and air crews, and the reputation of the service affects young people's decision about joining. In the United States, recruitment rates vary by year and branch of service. but all branches except the Navy met recruiting goals between October, 2023, and September, 2024 (Austin, 2024). The

Navy's recruiting challenges may be partly attributed to perceptions about different quality of life as a member of the various services. One factor in quality of life is the quality of military officers. Systematic coaching, emphasizing actionable feedback and practical guidance for JOs, could strengthen the quality of leadership, morale, and performance. Beyond the obvious benefits in terms of the effectiveness and satisfaction of the service members, better leaders would create a more attractive place to work. This, in turn, could support the recruiting and retention of highly capable individuals.

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