

Surface Warfare

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DIGITAL FEATURE



Surface Force Delivers Leadership Coaching Program

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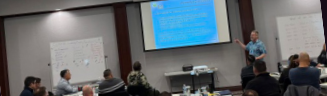
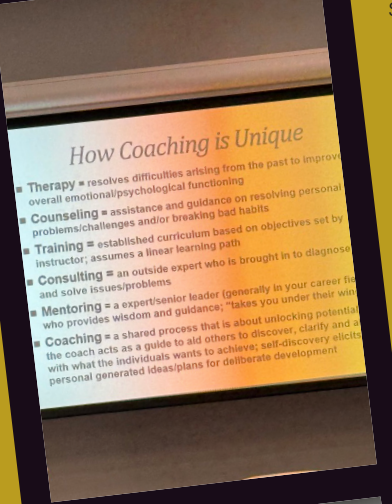
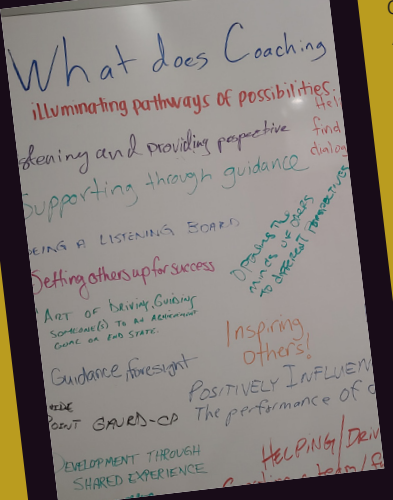
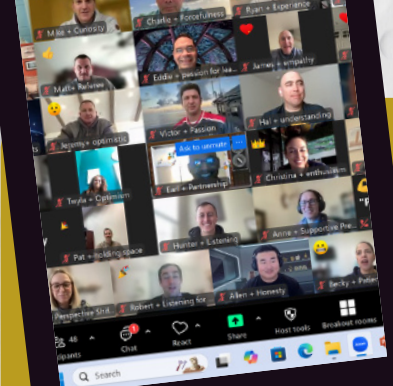
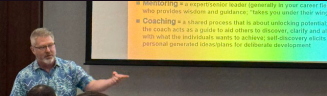
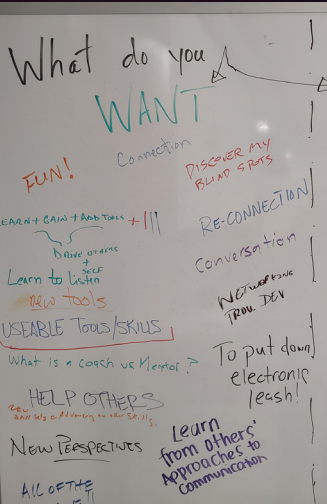
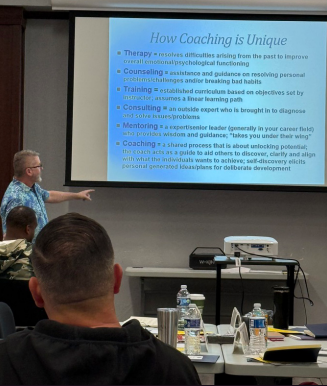
What it is

Everyone has a different theory about what it means to be a good leader. Some leaders will say it is a natural ability, others believe it can be learned. Still others might say leadership is all about setting a good example. Whatever your perspective, one thing seems undeniably true: Good leaders build more leaders. Leadership means helping others become good leaders after you, wanting to set them up to succeed because you know that you must at some point pass on the mantle.

Today, this idea is being applied to surface warfare in a first-of-its-kind Surface Force Leadership Coaching Program. Officially established in December 2024, the program exists to train senior leaders, comprised of post-command surface warfare officers (SWOs) and command master chiefs (CMCs), in coaching techniques to then provide coaching services to afloat command triads. These coaching services are provided on an individual and collective basis to the command's top leaders – commanding officer, executive officer, and command master chief.

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– CMDCM Jorrel “Jay” Reich



How It Started

Capt. Jason Motes, deputy director, force improvement office at Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet (CNSP), built the program from scratch so that experienced surface warfare leaders can learn and apply coaching principles in an official capacity by coaching fleet triads.

As a Navy Reservist, Motes came to CNSP in 2024 with this mission in mind. He immediately began brainstorming how to deliver coaching to surface warfare. “We really had three options,” said Motes. “We can hire coaches – there’s a plethora of qualified coaches to come in and coach. We could tap into MyNavy coaching [a non-accredited program through MyNavy HR], which is more of an organizational resource from the Navy’s perspective. Or we could grow our own right here at naval surface forces.”

Motes explained that the most attractive option was developing new coaches from a pool of experienced-at-sea commanding officers and CMCs because they understand what current triads are experiencing. “At that point, all we really had to do was train them on how to coach,” said Motes.

The first cohort of 36 Sailors began their training in March and are now implementing their training through coaching sessions with San Diego-based triads in basic, maintenance, and sustainment phases of readiness. Command Master Chief (CMDCM) Elias Robles III, senior enlisted leader at Afloat Training Group Pacific, was part of the first cohort to go through the training. He said he was curious but skeptical about the program until it began. “I quickly became a believer who wholeheartedly advocates for the program,” said Robles. “I use it all the time now and I have noticed a difference in my daily interactions.”

CMDCM Tarius Williams Avery, senior enlisted leader aboard the San Antonio-class amphibious transport dock ship USS Green Bay (LPD 20), also participated in the first cohort. “I think the program is absolutely awesome, inspiring, and motivating,” said Williams Avery. “It has given me new perspectives and tools that keep me focused on my own goals. I truly feel encouraged and supported to grow both personally and as part of the team.”

Future coaches go through three separate weeks of training. These weeks focus on fundamentals of coaching, advanced topics in coaching, and team-based coaching. After the training, they practice what they have learned by pairing with a triad and providing periodic coaching sessions.

CMDCM Jorrel “Jay” Reich, senior enlisted leader aboard the Wasp-class amphibious assault ship USS Makin Island (LHD 8), another coach from the first cohort, explained the goal of coaching. “Coaching is not about solving triad members’ problems for them or giving them advice, it is a tool to help them talk through their issues and aid them in creating a solution to their problem,” said Reich. “Essentially, we as coaches coach them in finding their own “win” to a situation.”

The program uses an accredited curriculum taught by U.S. Air Force Air University professors and credentialed Surface Force staff members. The course includes 90 hours of accredited coaching training, providing participants with accreditation on completion and qualifying them to sit for board certification and earn the Board Certified Coach credential.



How It Works

There are four phases to the leadership coaching program: selection, training, execution, and assessment. This format is designed to familiarize participants with coaching principles and equip them with the skills to be leaders who coach other leaders.

In phase one, future coaches are selected for the program based on volunteers. Post-command SWOs and post-first-tour CMCs are eligible to volunteer, and SWOs and junior CMCs are considered on a case-by-case basis.

Capt. Keith Fernandez, readiness operations center director at CNSP, said Motes asked him personally to join the first cohort and become a coach. He agreed immediately and was amazed by the training.

"It's pretty awesome," said Fernandez. "We're giving back to the Surface Warfare community. We're giving back to these triads that are just day in and day out getting inundated with all the stressors of being in command. That's my motivation, just to make sure that these folks are doing the best they can for their Sailors."

In phase two, coaches complete three weeks of training both in-person and virtually and they practice coaching skillsets in small groups.

"After learning how to coach someone, I realized how beneficial it could be," said Reich. "To me, it is a new form of leadership development that can be used long-term and assist our leaders in becoming a better version of themselves for their people and their commands."

Fernandez also said he learned the benefits of coaching during the training phase.

"It's another tool in the toolbox for leaders to utilize to get to where they want to be," Fernandez said. "It's not mentoring, it's not counseling, it's not therapy, it's really maximizing your potential. You already have a whole lot of potential, but if I could do some things and have conversations and guide you down a path or two to get you to maximize opportunities, that's an amazing thing."

In phase three, coaches are matched with a triad and give three to six hours of one-on-one coaching to each triad member along with group coaching to the triad collectively.

"The team-based coaching is exceptionally dynamic," said Motes. "It's the first time the triad can come together and say, 'Oh, wow, I didn't realize that something like that was on your mind.'"

Motes explained that the coach gets to facilitate that process for all three triad members and they get to learn from each other.

"The best way to describe it is the coach sets the structure, the client sets the agenda," Motes explained. "It's their problem, it's their challenge, it's their set of goals, and it's their support. It's their set of answers. We as coaches believe that the client already has the answers. We just help them get there."

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– Capt. Keith Fernandez

Fernandez saw his individual coaching sessions as something new and different than past experiences.

"If I'm going to mentor you, I'm probably talking more than half the time," Fernandez explained. "Coaching is just a lot of actively listening, picking up on things, picking up on insights they might have when they are talking ... when you present the framework that, 'hey, I'm here to bring out the best of you. I'm here to maximize your potential,' it's a different conversation."

Robles also reflected on the coaching he has done in phase three.

"In my opinion it is better than mentorship," said Robles. "Coaches are outside immediate chain of command, possess competency and experience in your field, and are equipped to challenge perceived barriers to goals."

There are five core pillars the coaches focus on in their sessions with triad members: warfighter readiness, safety, unit performance, command culture, and personal leadership.

According to Motes, triad members can bring almost any topic to a coaching session and receive support working through it under one of these five pillars.

"I think command climate is one of the most important ones," said Fernandez. "If you have the right climate, you can do anything."

Finally, in phase four, assessments are done to evaluate the coaching relationship and the growth of the triad on both a qualitative and quantitative basis. This phase takes lessons learned back to the program leaders to improve future iterations and training continuums.

Motes described the outcomes he would like to see from the program in a few different areas.

"From a triad perspective, more open communication and collaboration and more vulnerability drives trust," said Motes. "From a pillar perspective, we expect to see if we focus on safety in the coaching sessions – again, we don't force them to choose safety – but we should see growth in safety initiatives. We should see growth in warfighter readiness metrics. We should see growth in unit readiness metrics."

He also emphasized that what he expects to see anecdotally is a growth in confidence and a growth in trust.





Joining the Program



Coaches who complete the training are expected to go on to serve as a leadership coach to an assigned afloat triad for at least three months. During this time, they will conduct at least six one-on-one coaching sessions with each member of the triad and at least three group sessions with the triad.

Motes spoke about this vision and mission for leadership coaching with passion.

"We want all of our triads to have access to a coach, internal to this [type command] that has no conflict of interest, that's not going to violate confidentiality," he said.

All coaching sessions can be done either in-person or virtually. During and after the coaching period, coaches will also complete qualitative and quantitative surveys to assess the experience and its outcomes. Coaches from the first cohort have given glowing reviews.

"As a CMC, I want leaders who are critical thinkers, self-sufficient, intent based, and remove barriers to success - coaching facilitates this," said Robles. "Coaching helps draw from talent people currently have. With learned coaching techniques, our triads can help facilitate greater success throughout their crew."

"The word is spreading that we have these certified coaches now and I've been contacted by senior leaders in certain fleet staffs asking if I could engage with some of their senior leaders and coach them." Said Motes. "It's like we have our own mini pool of coach leaders that can really cater to the needs of the [type command]. Again, no one else is doing this. We're way ahead of our time."

As a first-of-its-kind program, the leadership coaching program will continue selecting and training new coaches for the foreseeable future. The next cohort will be convened on the East coast in October, and another will occur on the West coast in the spring. Those who are interested in volunteering for future training sessions are invited to reach out to Capt. Motes directly.

"I want any SWO out there that has an interest in giving back and learning the tenets of coaching to participate in our program," said Motes.

Robles added, "we have very intelligent and resourceful Sailors in our fleet. I want to see more of our leaders pave a path for Sailors to fully realize and maximize their potential."

Triad members looking for opportunities to be coached are also invited to contact Capt. Motes.

"Hey, triads, if you want to take your game to the next level, if you want to be the very best triad and win for all the right reasons, try coaching," he said.

Fernandez also emphasized the importance of coaching as a new and different tool for triad members.

"We're used to being mentored and advised and counseled. We're not used to being coached. So just be open to it," Fernandez said.

"It works," said Robles. "Buy in early, trust the process, and watch the program pay dividends!" ‡

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– CMDRCM Elias Robles III