

WELCOME ABOARD: DOS AND DON'TS FOR THE SPONSORING COMMAND

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Before your new crew arrives this summer, consider the opportunity and choice presented to your command. **The opportunity:** you can set up a new member for success and lay the foundation for a potential "Witherspoon"¹ or "Jarvis"² recipient arriving at your unit's brow. **The choice:** you can choose to ignore this opportunity; if you do, the excuses will be many and acceptable: "hectic operational tempo, constrained resources, too much change in the post-KATRINA world, etc."

We want you to recognize that opportunity and we hope you will choose to seize it. The following are some "Dos" and "Do Nots" acquired from almost 50 military members and veterans. Their advice and their experience may be exactly what **your** command needs in cultivating a winning team starting with each new member.

The First Day

Do you remember how stressful and hectic your first day at this command was? Do you recall how unsettling it was to not know the simplest nuances of the unit's daily routine? Now, you can change those circumstances for the new member and turn the first day into a great day for him/her.

- **Do:** Provide, in writing, specific guidance on uniform of the day, official start and end workday times, designated parking options and options for meals.
- **Do:** Pick a day that is comfortable for both the new member and the command. Mondays and Fridays tend to be chaotic starting and ending the week, so encourage your new member to report on a Tuesday-Thursday, if feasible.
- **Do:** Obtain the new member's cell phone number, and provide him/her with their sponsor's number for easy coordination.
- **Do:** Warn the new member of historic traffic jam times and locations.
- **Do:** When applicable, supervisors should clear a sponsor's calendar so s/he is available for the new member the entire first day s/he reports aboard. A sponsor should stay with the new member, show the member around, and make introductions throughout the unit.
- **Do:** Double check that the new member has a place to stay when s/he arrives! If the unit has reserved a barracks room, double check to be sure a room is available.
- **Don't:** Forget to warn the Quarterdeck that a new member is arriving
- **Don't:** Hesitate to schedule "check-in" appointments in advance of the member's arrival. You know s/he will need to meet the CO, visit the yeomen in Admin, and submit new information to the medical staff; why not set up those appointments so s/he is guaranteed to see them on Day 1?
- **Don't:** Forget to inform members of your division/department that a new member is arriving today, and should be welcomed.
- **Don't:** Hesitate to have the sponsor call the new member the night before their arrival confirming final details for the next day.
- **Best Practice:** If the new member is driving to work on the first day, reserve a parking space with his/her name on it. Treating someone like a VIP encourages them to rise to the occasion!
- **Faux Pas:** There are countless stories of new members showing up to work in cleanly-pressed tropical blue long with an eager attitude, only to be confronted by a surprised boss who mutters, "oh, I forgot you were reporting aboard today ..."

The Work Space

If you expect your new member to "hit the deck running," you need to clear the deck for them. A new member is only as useful as the tools you provide him/her. Take time prior to their arrival and offer these basic amenities on Day 1.

- **Do:** Have an assigned work space ready, prior to the new member's arrival.
- **Do:** Clean the work space, clear any loose gear that was deposited there during the days/weeks of vacancy.
- **Do:** List the member's name and rank on a sign. Even if the workspace is merely a cubicle, the sign still says "Welcome! We have been expecting you and are happy to have you onboard."
- **Don't:** Forget to show them where the head (bathroom) and locker rooms are. Likewise, take time to articulate the policy for signing up for a locker, etc.
- **Best Practice:** On one of the medium endurance cutters, an officer oversees the "Welcome Aboard" program. She ensures that the sponsor prepares the bunk/berthing for the new member (including clean sheets with hospital corners!), that the new member's nametag is mounted on their bunk, and that the issued PFD (lifejacket) and hardhat are positioned at the foot of the bunk. Wow!
- **Faux Pas:** Not having a predesignated work space for the new member, and asking him or her to "find an empty or vacant cubicle." If you could not take the time to find him/her a workspace before their arrival, does that mean you do not expect them to quickly engage their new responsibilities?

The Sponsor Program

While senior level enthusiasm is critical, the sponsor program is only as good as the junior-most member of your command understands it to be. Sponsors should be available, willing, knowledgeable of daily routine, and excited to assist.

- **Do:** Lead by example. As a supervisor, know who your new members will be, when they will be arriving, where they are reporting from, and who their sponsor is. If appropriate, reach out to the new member via phone or e-mail (preferably phone) and welcome them. Make the member comfortable in knowing that they are expected and supported prior to their arrival.
- **Do:** Prepare for the new member! Admin needs to stay in contact with the sponsor and copy the sponsor's supervisor on any e-mails regarding him/her.
- **Do:** Send a "Welcome Aboard" package, which could contain a list of contacts and phone numbers at the unit, local area information, list of realtors and rental companies, unit information, etc.
- **Do:** Ensure the assigned sponsor will be available the day of the new member's arrival.
- **Do:** Put your best foot forward on behalf of the entire command. Even if the new member won't be reporting to you, at least introduce yourself and make the member feel welcome.
- **Do:** Provide the sponsor with adequate guidance and support. This is especially important for personnel who have never served as a sponsor, and do not fully appreciate the scope of their responsibilities.
- **Do:** Use formal unit gatherings, such as Quarters or All-Hands, to

make official introductions for all new members.

- **Do Not:** Stop at the Commanding Officer and the new member's chain of command. Rather, arrange for the new member to meet all senior officers, ideally within one week of their reporting aboard.
- **Do Not:** Ask the members to introduce themselves (that's awkward);

have the sponsor introduce them by name, previous assignment, new job, and interesting details (i.e. family, hobbies, or home state).

- **Do Not:** Assign the responsibility of being a sponsor to a member unable or unwilling to commit.

10 QUESTIONS YOU **MUST** ASK WHEN REPORTING TO A NEW UNIT

The onus for successfully welcoming you lies with your new unit. However, even before you arrive, you must prepare yourself for your new unit. Just as you wonder what your new Command will be like, the men and women there are already curious as to what type of leader you will be. Will you be a "Lifter" or a "Leaner?"³

Consider the value of making every action, every question, and every opportunity work towards quickly establishing you as a great fit for your new Command. The following 10 questions were culled from the advice of nearly 50 military members and veterans.

1. What is my job?

This may seem too basic a question, but it is critical. Not every role you serve in will match the assigned position description. Focus on details, including which collateral duties you will inherit from the incumbent (and does your supervisor want you to continue those "extra" duties?). Many helpful members of the Command will share their views on what *they think* you should be doing. This is useful, so take notes and keep an open mind. Ultimately, you need to meet the expectations of your rating chain — starting with your supervisor.

2. Who is my rating chain?

Every six or twelve months, 3 individuals will assess your performance. Their written assessment will be reviewed by detailers, program managers, selection panels, and (occasionally), future bosses. In short, what is written about your performance will affect where you go next, what opportunities you will compete for, and what quality of life you and your family will enjoy. You want to know — immediately — who are those three individuals writing your evaluation, and what are their expectations of your performance.

3. Who will I work with?

Once you figure out who you will work for, it is imperative to learn who works for you. Politely ask for a personnel roster for your new division/department/staff. Take time to learn what is expected of them by your boss; ultimately, you will be accountable for ensuring these expectations are met. Also, learn who your peers are and what responsibilities you will share across divisions or departments. Ascertain specifics on what your individual responsibility is and what is a collective responsibility, by which you share ownership with someone else.

4. What are your expectations of me in the first 6 months?

This is a tough question, and it may surprise your new supervisor. Our Service places heavy responsibilities on members of all ranks, and values those who can prioritize and complete multiple tasks. Collaborate with your supervisor to understand which ones should be accomplished first, which ones require frequent support for long term success, and which ones can/should be addressed at a later date. This is especially salient for qualifications: several Coast Guard officers in the Navy Exchange program tell stories of being handed 7 separate PQS packets with the nebulous guidance "*get moving on this!*" Clearer guidance will tell you which "this" comes first.

5. What qualifications will I need for the job and how long will it take to qualify?

Your immediate value to the unit and the competitiveness of your career both hinge on your validated ability to do your new job. The culture of our Service places great value on qualifying quickly and shouldering the load of the current watch rotation. Find out which qualifications you are expected to attain. Once armed with expectations and PQS requirements, set realistic goals. Find out how long it takes an "average" service member to attain specific qualifications (then perhaps, seek to beat that time-frame). Set benchmark dates: hold yourself accountable and provide updates to your supervisor on a regular basis.

6. What is the process, and priority, for our qualifications?

Regarding process, see if your Command has an existing list of who is authorized to sign off your qualifications. Don't hesitate to ask if your new Command has any forums predesignated for certain qualifications. Typically, many Sectors offer one-day workshops to attain the Harbor Safety qualification. Likewise, many cutters still sponsor a one-day "D.C. Olympics" for accomplishing advanced damage control tasks. If there are multiple qualifications, ask for guidance on which one(s) take priority.

7. What pipeline training is available and/or expected?

This is not a bad question to ask *before* arriving at your new unit. While your current Command should be scaling back your duties to prepare for your departure, likewise, your new Command is better suited to receive you several weeks late (and qualified) than to add you to their roster, give you new responsibilities, and immediately send you TAD. If your

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new Command cannot support your pre-arrival TAD request, you should probably hold-off until you report. Pay close attention to any on-line courses like the Search and Rescue (E-SAR) or incident command system (ICS) courses; these offer the most flexibility and at no cost.

8. What is the duty rotation, and how soon can I start?

Whether qualified or not, you will be expected to stand duty. There will be a temptation to ease into this during the first week, until you are comfortable with your new role. Do not do this! Instead, jump in right away. Show your new Command that you are ready to participate fully and are enthusiastic to do so. Second, it is one of the best ways to learn new names and faces, as well as to gauge the climate of your new unit. Finally, it sets the tone for how you expect your qualification process to go: **you asked for the qualification expectations, you asked for the most current copy of the PQS, and you volunteered to stand duty on Day 1 ... Impressive!**

9. What traits distinguished past performers?

This important question rarely gets asked enough. This question gives supervisors free range to compare members and highlight successful skills and qualities. When you arrive and ask about skills which will set you apart, you clearly establish yourself as someone who intends to excel and is willing to learn new traits to succeed. Supervisors will be impressed with someone who is sincere and open to learning about what they think are key qualities. You will then have some key tools in your back pocket before you even get started.

10. What do I need to do this tour in order to be competitive for Job X next tour?

There is an old joke among cuttermen that you should never report to your first ship and immediately ask to apply to flight school. There is much truth to this humor. However, you should be forthright with your career intentions and seek opportunities and collateral duties that support your ambitions. Establish an early dialogue with your new supervisor and ask if they can tailor your duties and responsibilities to better suit your

long-term intentions. Ultimately, this gives the unit a satisfied, productive member who will earn their first choice for the next tour, and enhance the Command's reputation as a premier unit-of-choice!

About the Authors

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Endnotes

¹ The prestigious CAPT John G. Witherspoon Inspirational Leadership Award annually recognizes a Coast Guard Officer who best exemplifies the Coast Guard core values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty.

² The Captain David H. Jarvis Award for Inspirational Leadership is awarded to the Coast Guard Officer who has made an outstanding contribution to the high standards of competence and leadership in the Coast Guard.

³ Wilcox, Ella Wheeler "Lifters and Leanners:"
<http://www.bethanyipc.org.sg/poems/even040817.htm> 27 April 2008.

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