



Personal Conduct

A Systems-Thinking Approach



Article Title:
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'On visiting NASA at the beginning of the Apollo mission project, President Kennedy asked a janitor what he saw as his role. The janitor replied, "My job is to help to put a man on the moon."

The aforementioned epigraph illustrated the employee's recognition that his *Personal Conduct* mattered and that his actions and performance aligned with the aims, mission, and strategy of the organization. Peter Drucker (1977), a noted scholar, wrote: "...define the specific purpose and mission of the institution, make work productive and the worker achieving, and manage social impacts and social responsibilities" (p. 36).

The Coast Guard has a long tradition of aligning its members in making work productive and managing the social effects through its safety, security, and stewardship missions. Peter Senge (1990), in his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, wrote:

"...when you ask people about what it is like being part of a great team, what is most striking is the meaningfulness of the experience. People talk about being part of something larger than themselves, of being connected, of being generative." (p. 13).

Both Drucker and Senge implicitly wrote about the Coast Guard definition of *Personal Conduct* and how those attributes relate and contribute to an organization's success. The U.S. Coast Guard Leadership Competency guide defined *Personal Conduct*, in part, as leaders who "demonstrate belief in their own abilities and ideas; are self-motivated, results-oriented, and accountable for their performance; recognize personal strengths and weaknesses; emphasize personal character development..." (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011).

Alignment of our performance with the organization's mission and objectives is critical to mission success. A 2011 report on employee engagement recommended, "individuals need to know what they want — and what the organization needs — and then take action to achieve both" (BlessingWhite Inc., 2011, p. 1). Burkholder, Golas, and Shaprio, (2007) illustrated the connection between mission, people, and performance (Figure 1).



Figure 1

The aforementioned paragraphs and Figure 1 demonstrate the concept of systems thinking. The theory of systems thinking focuses on the dynamic concurrent and subsequent interactions within an organization (Aronson, 1998). Simply stated, systems thinking allow one to understand and view the organization as a whole rather than just its component parts. Systems thinking recognize that actions and activities within an organization are related and interconnected.

Systems thinking is a theoretical and pragmatic perspective leaders must possess to understand their how one's *Personal Conduct* can affect mission outcomes. If, as leaders, we subscribe to a systems thinking approach, what actions can we take to best align our *Personal Conduct* to achieve mission outcomes?

The U.S. Coast Guard *Personal Conduct* definition suggests that we perform an honest and introspective self-assessment of our capabilities and capacities. Through this *Personal Conduct* self-assessment, opportunities for development and growth emerge. Several tools exist to assist in the alignment of our *Personal Conduct* with the organization.

One method to align *Personal Conduct* developmental and growth opportunities with the organizational mission and objectives is to develop an employee performance plan. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) developed an 8-step process guide to assist leaders in the alignment of people and performance with organizational goals using an employee performance plan (OPM, 2001). The definition elements of *Personal Conduct* can aid leaders to determine and assess those necessary qualifications and proficiencies to achieve individual and unit goals. "Leaders must understand each individual's talents, interests, and needs and then match those with the organization's objective" (BlessingWhite Inc., 2011, p. 1).

The OPM performance plan process guide recommends that leaders begin with an end state in mind - what the organization wants to accomplish. Using a systems thinking approach, this strategic to tactical method enables the leader to identify organizational accomplishments to help determine specific individual and unit accomplishments necessary to achieve stated mission objectives (OPM, 2011).

A second method to align *Personal Conduct* with organizational mission and objectives is through the use of an Individual Development Plan (IDP). The use of an IDP is consistent with the *Personal Conduct* elements of "recognizing personal strengths and

weaknesses” (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011). Used constructively, an IDP can be an effective management and employee tool, identifying and documenting qualifications and proficiencies needed for individual development. A useful exercise would be to review and align the employee performance plan with the IDP to identify, complement, and understand *Personal Conduct* perspectives.

The employee performance plan and the IDP is just a couple of tools to increase one’s *Personal Conduct* for individual development and ensure alignment to mission objectives. Other development activities include mentoring/coaching/shadowing, expectation setting; assessments, reward achievement, delivering discipline, formal training, off-duty education, and rotational assignments. These tools and techniques represent varied examples of development actions that can aid the improvement and development of one’s *Personal Conduct* attributes to ensure alignment with mission objectives.

The systems thinking relationship between *Personal Conduct* and an organization’s mission and objectives is not a new phenomenon, especially within the U.S. Coast Guard. Systems thinking require us to have a broader, more holistic perspective and appreciation of our *Personal Conduct* and its relationship and effect on the organization. Acting on your *Personal Conduct* from a systems thinking approach is a constructive mechanism to ensure alignment between your role in your organization and your organization’s mission and objectives.

Leadership competencies addressed: Personal Conduct; Aligning Values, Accountability and Responsibility

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