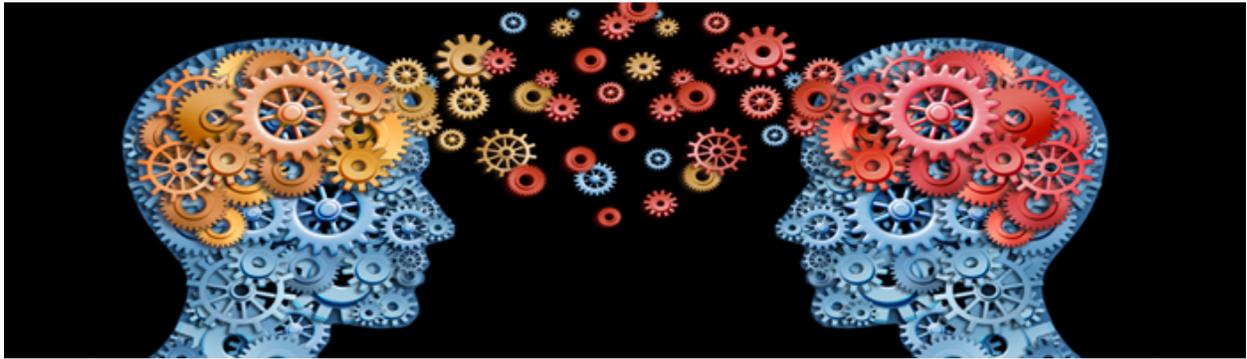


**Lessons on Leadership:  
A Case Study in Cognitive Apprenticeship**



*By LCDR Gordon A. Hood*

Every year the Commandant publishes a guidance document to promotion boards and selection panels that highlights his expectations of an officer. These are criteria used when considering candidates for promotion and assignment. Undoubtedly, many of the expectations emphasize desired traits of a leader, or leadership skills.

Skills can be learned, so how does one learn *leadership* skills? There are many articles, training courses, and observations that can provide learning opportunities. But since leadership is a skill, and skills must be practiced and critiqued, feedback is required. What is the mechanism for that feedback? The officer's semiannual evaluation report is too little, too late.

We like to use the word "mentor" in the Coast Guard; seniors mentor juniors, those experienced mentor novices. This concept provides a great, evidence-based method of officer development. But is it intentional and systematic?

### **The fledgling Junior Officer – a common problem...**

So here is the all-too-frequent situation: Mr. Ensign graduates, gets his commission, and reports to his first unit. He has learned lots of leadership theory, and even tried some techniques out on the college freshmen under his charge. But his practical experience is very limited and soon he realizes he really has no idea how to lead – probably because his division chief keeps telling him that he's not making good leadership decisions. He has never really learned *how* to lead. What to do?

The best decision Mr. Ensign makes all week is to approach Ms. Commander, who has over 15 years of leadership experience in the organization, and ask for help.

To address this problem we will apply the Cognitive Apprenticeship approach to learning. Cognitive Apprenticeship offers a learning method that allows an apprentice, or developing leader, to learn from an experienced master of the trade. Things to consider about this theory include:

The primary role of the master, as the teacher, is to identify and explain thought processes, tasks, and decisions to the apprentice. Make **tacit** knowledge (mental activity) **explicit** (overt, behavioral) to the learner.

The strategy used to implement the theory is simple: Pair workers so that a novice learns from an expert. The master must be willing and able to identify and communicate processes through **modeling** (example), **coaching** (guide) and **scaffolding** (vary support) with **articulation** (explain), **reflection** (evaluate) and **exploration** (attempt) by the apprentice. Maximizing explicit knowledge includes activity such as exercises, practice & repetition, questioning, and collaboration.

The following is a hypothetical application of Cognitive Apprenticeship, a systematic approach to mentoring, and a proposed solution to this workplace problem:

1. The master uses **modeling** to teach the novice a leadership skill of “looking out for others”.

Ms. Commander has been very successful in her career and is well regarded by both her colleagues and subordinates. She *identified* a few behaviors to Mr. Ensign, such as always being accessible, advocating for subordinates, and providing timely recognition for superior performance. Ms. Commander *explained* that people are the most important resource, and it is important to consider your employees’ personal needs and support a good work-life balance. The *example* she sets is a model to follow.

2. The novice responds through **articulation**.

To ensure that he really has the picture, Mr. Ensign *explained* what he has observed. He *stated* how Ms. Commander accomplished these behaviors, such as keeping an open door and selecting at least one employee every week to praise for a job well done. Mr. Ensign *described* the modeled behaviors that enhance quality of life.

3. The master uses **coaching** to teach the novice a leadership skill of “developing others”.

Ms. Commander *met* with Mr. Ensign to study the employee reviews (personnel evaluations) of his subordinates. She had him identify strengths and areas for improvement of each member. They then *discussed* ways that Mr. Ensign could provide professional development opportunities. As he implemented these strategies, Ms. Commander provided *continual feedback* and offered *recommendations* for improvement based on her years of experience.

4. The novice responds by **reflection**.

Mr. Ensign *looked back* on his previous behaviors and what he had learned while working with Ms. Commander. He *identified* his failure to thoroughly counsel his employees on their performance. Mr. Ensign *evaluated* his professional development and training strategies to ensure that they maximized his subordinates’ potential. He documented things that worked and things that did not, specifically looking for a change in his knowledge, behavior, and results.

5. The master uses **scaffolding** to teach the novice a leadership skill of “directing others”.

Ms. Commander recognized that Mr. Ensign first needed a significant amount of *support* to influence others. She wanted to teach him how to win people over rather than simply issuing orders. Ms. Commander helped Mr. Ensign articulate a vision to his employees and have them set goals to accomplish tasks. She slowly *backed off* as Mr. Ensign began to inject inspiration into his division and adapt his style to different situations.

6. The novice responds through **exploration**.

As Mr. Ensign *attempted* different strategies he learned what achieved results. He *practiced* different methods and established high work standards and criteria. When these measurements needed to change, Mr. Ensign *adapted* them.

Before long, Mr. Ensign's division Chief again approached him – but this time to communicate his respect and appreciation for the officer. Mr. Ensign had certainly changed; he had learned leadership skills from a master!

Leadership Competencies: Accountability & Responsibility, Followership, Self Awareness & Learning, Influencing Others and Mentoring.



*Photos by David Tucker, USNA Public Affairs.*