

# Oops! I Spoke

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A carrier air-wing commander once told me the best part about being XO is that you're in on all the important decisions but are responsible for few, if any of them. After four months in my current job, I honestly still can say it's the greatest one in the Navy, even though there have been some bumps along the way.

I remember talking to the skipper about how well everything seemed to be going. Our troops were performing at levels that amazed us both; all operational commitments were being met with stellar results, and the maintenance department had turned the corner on the post-deployment/surge-period aircraft-readiness challenges.

One weekend later, though, things fell apart. Thursday started with disappointing news that one of our newly frocked superstar PO3s had popped positive for cocaine use. This young man's Navy future could have been limitless. The news about him caused many a wet eye among the ranks because we knew his time as a Golden Warrior would be very short.

On Friday morning, I got a call that one of our less-than-stellar performers had been arrested for DUI. Saturday morning began with a phone call about a second DUI arrest from Friday night. A young airman took center stage Saturday night by being drunk while on duty, and Sunday morning's rude awakening was that one of our young airmen had been incarcerated for assault. Talk about getting blindsided with a whole pot full of bad news!

Needless to say, Monday was consumed with a flood of meetings as we tried to get our arms around this stream of poor conduct. The skipper solicited inputs from every level of leadership—to the last man and woman, all agreed that the message was being put out. We obviously had proof, though, that it wasn't being heard.

Our department-head meeting revealed the expected responses but did provide some good insight:

- In general, our folks showed tremendous pride in their professional lives; their on-the-job performance was commendable. However, they

Navy photo by PH3 Matthew Bash



# e Too Soon



Navy photo by PHAN Chris Thamann



Navy photo by PH2 Charles A. Edwards, Jr.

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displayed little or no pride in their personal lives.

- All agreed that our folks readily acknowledged the risk but were willing to accept it—possibly because they felt they had little to lose.

We already had established a free “dial a taxi” service within the command, but, much to our chagrin, not one Sailor had taken advantage of this program in more than four months. We also had tried filling their off-duty hours with Captain's Cup participation and other squadron events. Still, something obviously was lacking.

To manage this leadership challenge, we adopted several measures:

- We placed an additional signature line on all leave and out-of-bounds chits for the member's mentor.

- The skipper asked each division officer to identify at-risk personnel: those male E-4s and below with a previous NJP, XO inquiry, or discharge review board. Once identified, these individuals are monitored closely before the start of each weekend's liberty.

- All division officers were required to read the Plan of the Week line-by-line to their divi-

sions—both the day- and night-check personnel.

The division officers also were told to reiterate the command's zero-tolerance policy for drunk driving and drug usage. The skipper made the CMC and me responsible for getting the word out to our TAD folks.

- We established a squadron phone tree that the CO or I would activate anytime 100-percent notification of personnel became necessary (e.g., anytime a significant event happens to a War Party member). The phone tree also would be used to help manage all hands with respect to force protection in the event of stateside terrorist aggression.

The events of that one weekend drove home numerous points for the skipper and me. It's one thing to “put out the word”; it's another matter to make sure the word is heard and followed. We must protect our most precious asset—our people. We cannot afford to lose man-hours when they are caught up in the court system for drunk driving or confined to hospital beds for injuries. And we certainly don't want to see one of them die in a mishap. ■