

## ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT

# Understanding Complexity in Organizational Management

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**Interviewed By: Andrew Ledford**

On December 14th, 2018, I sat down with VADM Carter to discuss his unique 37-year experience with organizational management. Successful organizational management has been defined often in complex organizations as managing and leading people as well as controlling vast resources to achieve organizational objectives (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). VADM Carter's experiences as the Commander of the Enterprise Carrier Strike Group, the President of the Naval War College, and for the past five years, the Superintendent of the United States Naval Academy, provides a rich context for a discussion on this topic.

**Ledford:** What adjustment to your organizational leadership was required in the transition from your last fleet command to the Naval War College? What adjustment was required in the transition from the Naval War College to the Naval Academy?

**VADM Carter:** My first one-star job was to lead an expeditionary deployment-planning group as part of the Joint Forces Command. Secretary Gates directed that Joint Forces Command be shut down in 2010 and I was the lead planner for that shut down. I learned more about how to lead and manage complex organizations - active duty, military reserve, civilians, and government contractors through that disestablishment that lasted just over eight months. This was a billion dollar, joint, combatant, four-star command. It had 6,600 active and civilian employees and another component almost that same size in contractors. It was a drill in understanding organizational management, understanding what motivates people to do their job, and understanding what is most important to them, which is their livelihood and predictability. The Secretary of Defense did disestablish the Joint Forces Command on August 4th, 2011, and planning all of that was life changing for me. It set me up to go command the Enterprise Carrier Strike Group, which seemed a lot easier in terms of the complexity of the mission.

The most interesting aspect of this transition was in my understanding of complex organizations. As the Commander of the Enterprise Carrier Strike Group, I was in charge of a very large organization – a carrier, a carrier air wing, cruisers, destroyers, an oiler, coalition ships, and independent deployers. At one point there were 50 ships under my command including another carrier strike group. As complex as that sounds, it was relatively simple in terms of complex organizations. The definitions of the chain of command were exact. People knew what to do with their respective chain of command and their particular leadership positions.

Following that tour, I was then asked to run the Naval War College, which despite my command experience, seemed daunting. Now, I was going into an academic setting – one that I had not led in before. One of the points I espouse when I talk to future commanding officers and executive officers is that in command, not only do you have to understand your mission, you have to be the most competent person in the room. Well, going to be the college president of the world's oldest naval war college, there is no way I

was able to go as the smartest academic there because it just wasn't my background. I had fleet and combat experience and I had to be honest about that. I had to do "team building" – a different style of leadership to be effective in that role. I was initially going there to break-glass and to do some significantly different things: to create a different masters level program, to have the fleet reconnect with the mission of the War College, to build out its war gaming capability, and bring in a higher quality of Naval and Marine Corps student. There was no way I could go up there and just make it happen. I had to bring the key leaders of the team in and have an open discussion to see if they had the same view of their own institution as I did.

When I came from the Naval War College to the Naval Academy, it was much different. This is one of the most complex organizations that any three-star in the Navy leads because the Naval Academy operates through so many circles of influence. The circles are varied and weigh differently. How one manages and leads them to carry out the mission is also very different. As Superintendent, I have two roles: one is

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**Vice Admiral Walter E. "Ted" Carter Jr.** became the 62nd superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy on July 23, 2014. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1981, was designated a Naval Flight Officer in 1982, and graduated from the Navy Fighter Weapons School, Top Gun, in 1985. Carter's career as an aviator includes extensive time at sea, deploying around the globe in the F-4 Phantom II and the F-14 Tomcat. Carter commanded the VF-14 "Tophatters," served as Executive Officer of USS Harry S. Truman (CVN 75), and commanded both USS Camden (AOE 2) and USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70). His most recent Fleet command assignment was Commander, Enterprise Carrier Strike Group (CSG-12). He served as Commander, Joint Enabling Capabilities Command and subsequently as lead for the Transition Planning Team during the disestablishment of U.S. Joint Forces Command in 2011. Most recently, Carter served as the 54th president of the U.S. Naval War College.

**Dr. Andrew Ledford** is a Permanent Military Professor and an Assistant Professor of Leadership and Ethics at the United States Naval Academy. He teaches the core class of leadership and the Code of the Warrior elective. His past research has been on social movement in Iran as well as the nexus of religion and politics in the Middle East. More recently he leads a research group based in Annapolis on mindfulness, grit, and resilience. Dr. Ledford has a master's degree in International Relations with a focus on Irregular Warfare from the Naval War College, where he was the honor graduate. He received a master's degree in sociology and his PhD from Princeton University where he studied political sociology and social network analysis.

the military commander with a relatively small chain of command of military members and the other is the college president.

It is so unique because of these circles though. The brigade of midshipmen, they are the main element of the organization. They are the whole reason we are here. As an organizational manager, you must understand what they do from Induction Day to Graduation Day and how you develop them along the way. The faculty members are another important circle. There might appear to be some similarities between the Naval War College and the Naval Academy for the 600 faculty in Annapolis (half of which are civilians), but it is a completely different system, a different “tenure” model, and completely different academic program. For example, a third of the Naval War College constituency is foreign officers. Here at the Naval Academy, there is a small group, 60 out of 4400 midshipmen, that is foreign and taught at an undergraduate level.

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The Naval Academy staff beyond the 600 teaching faculty, the parents' organization, and the sponsor parents for the midshipmen are all additional circles of influence that are important to organizational management of the Naval Academy. Then there are the circles that are not obvious to those inside the campus. The alumni, for example, as with the other service academies, are very passionate about the Naval Academy. The circle of influence of our 60,000 strong alumni, many of whom write us notes every day - and

not to just tell us that we are doing a good job - care quite a bit and bring a good deal of influence to who we are as an institution moving forward.

Members of Congress are especially unique to the Naval Academy because of their role in the midshipman nomination process and their proximity to Annapolis. The town of Annapolis is also an important circle of influence that impacts the Naval Academy. All of these circles have varying levels of importance and I've only mentioned the top several - there are about 25 to consider. I didn't understand all of those circles when I first arrived but I understood the concept of managing and leading these varying circles of influence.

We are organized in a unique way with a Commandant of Midshipmen who rotates out every two years, has a tremendous breadth of responsibility with the brigade and leadership and character programs and all of the professional development. We also have a

civilian athletic director who has a long-term position and an academic dean who has been a civilian dating back to the early 1960's. We have a coordinator for information technology and coordinator for finances. We have a diversity officer. There

is quite a spread of really important people across our senior leader team and they have to run their part of the organization but they can't run it in a silo. The challenge to organizational management with this much complexity is in the cross-coordination that allows us to benefit everyone.

**Ledford:** As Superintendent, you mentioned that your senior management team consists of among others, the Commandant of midshipmen - a position that rotates every two years and long term positions

such as the Academic Dean and Athletic Director. What are the organizational management challenges of working within this structure?

**VADM Carter:** One of the ways to deal with that type of personnel change and make sure the train keeps running on the tracks is to make sure the civilian leadership is in balance with key military billets that rotate out more frequently. The civilian leadership is there to advise and guide the military members such as the Commandant and that is a very tough position. We have key civilians here who understand the breadth and complexity of the Naval Academy that can advise the Commandant for many of the first weeks and months of command. It is impossible to know as Commandant or Superintendent, even if you've had a job here before, all that you own and how to deal with everything from honor violations to conduct cases to physical education failures. That part is very important.

I had to find a battle rhythm with the senior leader team so we could not just have subject matter presented that was relevant to everyone, but also engage in open discussions on what we were doing that might impact someone else. Of course, I also have an open door policy so that any of those leaders can call me, email me, or walk in the door to see me for that discussion as well. Most importantly however, I do a planned individual meeting roughly once a week with each of those senior leaders to sit down with an agenda on past and future events. You would think we would run out of things to talk about but we never do.

**Ledford:** How has character impacted your leadership style and organizational management success?

**VADM Carter:** When I arrived here, I put my emphasis on three different areas for my influence. The first was character development programs. The second was the development of cyber operations on our academic side and the third was the international programs for our midshipmen. Those were designed to

make the biggest impact for the life and development of the midshipmen. What I found when I came here was that the character development programs, although certainly not broken, required adjustment for the generational changes of who is coming in. During my time, we saw the tail end of the millennial generation and now pretty much all of the midshipmen are part of the centennial group. During my time, we revamped the entire honor system, which took a couple of years. We now have just rewritten the aptitude system and how we evaluate who is ready for graduation. Those were just some of the outputs of what we're doing on the character development side of the Naval Academy.

**Ledford:** Who were your mentors at the organizational leader level and what did you learn most from them?

**VADM Carter:** Before I went to the Naval War College, I had to interview for the job. A lot of people don't know that it happens. They don't just pick someone for the job based on their record. From that interview, the Chief of Naval Operations asked me for a paper of what I would do at the Naval War College should I become president. He said, "I'm not going to tell you when to submit it, how long it has to be, or what you should write about." He made it clear that what I wrote about would be the determinant of whether I was picked or not. I had to do some research on where the Naval War College had historically positioned itself as an academic institution. I leaned in on two mentors that were three-star admirals at the time who understood complex organizations. Both of them were in the Norfolk area and they gave me tremendous insight that now was a critical moment for change at the Naval War College, similar to the interwar period between the 1920's and mid-1930's. My paper reflected that tone.

The first two drafts that I shared with my mentors were given F's as not being bold enough. I had to completely rethink what my influence could be at the

Naval War College in my short time up there. What I eventually wrote was my road map for what I wanted to do once I arrived there. I didn't have the bandwidth or the time to do the same thing before coming to the Naval Academy but I did have to show up knowing what priorities I was going to have and do a full analysis of our mission statement.

Fortunately, there have been many recent Superintendents who care deeply about the Naval Academy that have become very important to supporting me. I found one of the Superintendents who had more of my personal leadership style to be very helpful and he provided tremendous insight as to how he thought I should approach the job. I heard from others that my job was to be "up-and-out" person and the Commandant was the "down-and-in" person. I have learned over time however, to be more and more involved in the development of our midshipmen. So, it took me a little while, but I found that I had the bandwidth for that most important circle of influence, the brigade of midshipmen, and that I spend much of my time on them. This is one of those jobs that you have to hit the deck running. You really do need about six months before you understand the complexity and where the pockets of strength are because it is so complicated.

The alumni piece is especially complex because they are paying attention. They are here in Annapolis, serving as sponsors and mentoring our midshipmen. Making sure you have them aligned with what you are trying to do is critical. Every alumni weekend and every reunion, I've spent an enormous amount of time making sure that my briefings to them on the state of the Naval Academy is up to date and being sincerely frank as to what the challenges are and what we are doing to tackle them.

**Ledford:** How much time is spent "strategic messaging" in comparison to your role on the yard?

**VADM Carter:** Daily. I wake up thinking about it and go to sleep thinking about it. For my role, I'm the principal spokesperson for the Naval Academy. There are others that do it, but it is surprisingly few. If anyone is talking to a member of Congress or an alumni group or another large influence group on the west coast or in Texas, I'm usually the one doing most of that communication. I have to be able to get it right. I think it is critical to being effective in this job.

**Ledford:** What kind of unique challenges has there been as Superintendent with direct civilian oversight (Congress) and donors that were not as apparent with your leadership experiences in the fleet?

**VADM Carter:** You are an installation commander. The hundred-plus year-old buildings on a relatively small campus that is contending with sea-level rise is not something you worry about when you are just trying to make the reactors work on the USS Enterprise. It is a historic site since 1961, so that adds a whole different element to who we are as an institution. We host two million visitors each year so the place has to look a certain way. It is our principal recruitment tool for anyone coming here to see our campus. We have to make sure the resources we have here are dedicated at the right level and that has been challenging. We've been vocal about it. We have a lot of construction, new and repair, going on. This is the most amount of cranes and scaffolding on campus since the 1960's. That is one of the biggest challenges as the installation commander.

The other big challenge is just dealing with the reality of social engagement with our own midshipmen. All of the social challenges that go with being an 18 or 19 year-old, they are real and they are here. While we still are not perfect, we keep working at it. We rotate 25% of the midshipmen out every year and we do everything we can to show them what the proper dignity and respect for others looks like. Now that we are almost 30% women, there is much more interaction in terms of gender integration and its getting healthier

and healthier every year. The morale of the brigade is getting better but these social challenges still exist in small pockets. We are very transparent on unwanted activities between men and women here and that is something I spend an incredible amount of time on, more so than any other place I've ever been.

**Ledford:** How do large Navy events like the Fat Leonard scandal or the McCain/Fitzgerald collisions impact your direction with the organization?

**VADM Carter:** It is at the strategic level as well as the tactical level. We'll build case studies for our midshipmen on why those things happen so they are prepared for avoiding those mistakes when they join the fleet. But more at the strategic level, people will look at us and ask if Academy people were involved in those events. Did the Academy do everything right to prepare their graduates in terms of ethical decision making and who they are as a leader of character? We review ourselves every time there is a fleet event, whether it is a mishap in an airplane or a firing for misdeeds, we consider if there were any Academy grads, what year did they graduate, what was the program like then, and is it something we need to look at here today. We do pay attention to all of it.

**Ledford:** From a leadership development standpoint, what advice do you have for new leaders regarding learning about organizational management?

**VADM Carter:** The differences between leading a complex organization and leading a tactical or a direct military chain of command organization are two skill sets. The first skill set is the ability to listen and be open to learning every day. The second is that you have to be approachable. An old adage is that bad news doesn't get better with age. In an institution as complex as this one, there could be little pockets of bad things that happen every day. The openness to hear that and let people bring you the news but also a recommendation for a correction without you having to tell them what

it is, is the key to getting better. That's more than just a personality trait. That is a learned leadership style that you have to have in complex organizations. It is much more about team building.

**Ledford:** What will your most important advice be for your successor in terms of organizational management?

**VADM Carter:** The most important advice would be to get here before they are in command and embrace the significant change that is coming. When we finish our Cyber Operations Building in Hopper Hall, it will completely change the face of everything we do in academics here at the Naval Academy. Although we are teaching and thinking about that now, it will change the face of what this place will be and the next Superintendent is going to have to be ready for that. They are going to have to be ready for how it changes the faculty and how it changes the infrastructure of the campus. They will have to understand how it will change the weight of the moral, mental, and physical pillars of development of the midshipmen. They are not always co-equal. It is not always one weighted over the other - they vary. Understanding the dynamic that goes with that will probably be one of the most important things the next Superintendent will need to do when they get here.

**Ledford:** Could you expand how you see that changing?

**VADM Carter:** I see that in the 25 different academic majors we have today. We've seen the weight of the cyber operations major go from 22 midshipmen in the class of 2018 to 110 midshipmen now in the class of 2021. It is changing right in front of us. That is 10% of the class in one academic major. We are creating something that is very desirable by the brigade of midshipmen and needed in the fleet. That is just a single data point that will have second and third order effects throughout the whole brigade. That is the type of change that we can expect.

**Ledford:** What are the best parts of organizational management as Superintendent of the Naval Academy? What are the worst parts of organizational management as Superintendent of the Naval Academy?

**VADM Carter:** My two favorite parts are Induction Day and obviously Graduation Day, to see the beginning and then the end of a midshipman's journey. Induction Day is a close second to Graduation Day. Additionally, anytime I get to do something or be around the brigade of midshipmen is also a highlight, from going to see sporting events and musical performances, to just being with our midshipmen in King Hall for noon meal.

My least favorite thing to do is to analyze and evaluate those that are struggling, whether it is a case

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of honor, conduct, academics, or physical fitness. Making a decision that they are not capable of making it through here and separating them from the Naval Academy is very difficult. In my first couple of years, I couldn't sleep for days knowing that someone's life was forever changed. Even though I never second-guessed a decision, those events had that kind of impact on me. The good news is we don't do it that often. Our retention rate is very high, one of the highest of any college in the country. Our admissions team does such a good job of bringing in quality candidates. I didn't talk

about admissions yet in this conversation but within a complex organization, it is a huge influence group. You only get one chance to get it right. If you don't get it right on Induction Day, you don't get a chance to revisit it. If 200 plebes quit during their first summer, we just lost 15% of the class. Our faculty and staff are very dedicated to making our midshipmen successful. That part of this business is almost as important as all the rest. When people ask how do you have an 89-90% graduation rate, I often point to admissions.

**Ledford:** Any other points you would like to make?

**VADM Carter:** For a place like this that has so many social requirements and such a demand on time, because there is only one admiral here, often times I am the only person who can fill the spot that is needed. You can let it overrun you and it can consume you if you're not careful. You have to find that balance. Sadly, you have to sometimes say, "I can't make that event. I'm just not

available." Knowing when to say no is just as important as saying yes. A work life balance is key.

**Ledford:** Sir, thank you so much for your time.

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## Reference

Hersey, P. & Blanchard, K. (1969). *Management of Organizational Behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.