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Paralyzed in the Puzzle Palace

Busting the Bureaucracy, the UOD Message, and Cumshaw

By Robert Porter Lynch, LT USN

After graduating from college via the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps program, as a young Ensign in the US Navy, I was assigned the duty of Electronics Material Officer on a newly commissioned Fast Frigate, *USS Trippe* (1075), which was loaded with the most sophisticated electronics gear available for warfare at the time.



My main job was to keep all the radar, radios, crypto gear, and electronics warfare countermeasures equipment running at all times. This meant overseeing operations of all the Electronics Technicians, while ensuring we had adequate spare parts, and making sure the electronics supply chain kept up with breakdowns and routine placements and upgrades.



Many times the supply chain failed to have critical repair parts in stock, either on board the ship or in the Supply Depot ashore. This resulted in critical equipment being dysfunctional, which required a fleet-wide Casualty Report (known as a “CasRep”). It notified everyone that equipment was inoperable and our ship’s operational readiness degraded.

Any gear that was “CasRepped” was expected to be fixed ASAP, or heads would roll. Naval Captains hate CasReps because it’s a ding against their performance and leadership, impacting their eligibility for promotion.

When we needed parts that weren’t in shipboard inventory, standard procedure required the Electronics Material Officer to initiate a priority special request message for stock that might be in the local Supply Depot. Too often, no one would give proper authorization for their release. This happened so frequently, we all just referred to the mess as a SNAFU – “Situation Normal: All Fouled Up.”

The Puzzle Palace

Ultimately the problem was traceable back to the Pentagon, which we affectionately dubbed the “Puzzle Palace” because of its byzantine rules and inscrutable operating procedures. Unless you knew someone on the inside, you were just out of luck. To make matters worse, the telephone systems to communicate (called *Autovon*) was continually overloaded and perpetually busy. Some bean-counter had calculated it was only used to 1/3 capacity, so it was cut back to save costs. No one realized that the system was operating at 100% capacity during the 8 hour work day, then under-utilized during off-hours. Thus we couldn’t call around to find the parts we needed and have them diverted to our ship. I’d spend hours sitting at the phone just trying to get an open line.

The Puzzle Palace was controlled by four senior officers named *Everybody*, *Somebody*, *Anybody* and *Nobody*.

A critical decision needed to get a job done.

Everybody was sure that *Somebody* would make it.

Anybody could have taken action, but passed the buck to *Nobody*,
who got entangled in analysis paralysis.

Somebody got angry because he knew it was *Everybody*’s job.

Everybody thought *Anybody* could do it, but *Nobody* realized that *Everybody* wouldn’t do it.

Everybody blamed *Somebody* when *Nobody* did what *Anybody* should have.

And there was I, a lowly Ensign, betwixt, bewitched, bothered, and bewildered.

Maneuvering the Matrix

The Navy, run as a hierarchical bureaucracy, was wedded to the premise of “Chain of Command” (which I referred to as the “Ball and Chain of Command” – a conundrum, which will soon become evident.)

Since 1842, the Navy had created a series of Bureaus to handle various dimensions of procurement and material matters. While this seemed logical on the surface, in reality the bureaus are a complex matrix where everyone has to get their fingers in the action. Because naval ships are considered one of the most complex technologies on the planet, with more integrated systems per cubic foot than anything else (with perhaps the exception of a space capsule), managing the enormous complexity required a lot of *coordination* between the bureaucratic silos. However, there was often *insufficient cooperation* across the bureaus because each was its own fiefdom – with no one was positioned to take ultimate responsibility for getting the job done. When this happened, the junior Ensign (me) at the bottom of the chain took the pain; that was the “game.”

The idealism I had when we first commissioned our newly constructed ship was quickly being dispelled.

As I moaned about my plight in the wardroom, our my Captain, Alan Higginbotham --an astute leader from the hills of West Virginia -- smiled and let me in on a well- kept secret. “I guess they didn’t teach you this in college, but it will be a game changer for you...”



Unless Otherwise Directed

My Captain said it was impossible to prevent the Plague of Puzzle Palace Paralysis; just get around it.

He then laid out the principle of ***Unless Otherwise Directed***: a compelling way to put a cutlass to red tape.

“First, send a message telling the proper authority what you want, make a recommendation or request for action, and wait the appropriate amount of time, usually 24-48 hours.

“Then, if no one makes a decision, or fails to approve the request, or procrastinates -- which is likely -- then send the message entitled “UOD – Unless Otherwise Directed – I will be taking the following action....”

Eager to test my newly acquired power and authority, I sent a message requesting some overdue parts from the Supply Depot, informing the necessary chain of command.

As expected, senior officers *Somebody, Everybody, Nobody,* and *Anybody* balked. Soon thereafter, I sent another message stating: *Unless Otherwise Directed*, I was initiating a Priority Requisition for immediate release of the parts.

Still, no one responded, so I fabricated a very officious looking requisition, marched to the Supply Depot with a Gunner’s Mate dressed officially as Shore Patrol (just for show), presented the priority requisition attached to a set of messages endorsed by my Captain, and walked away with the parts.

No one ever complained. My Captain congratulated me; my crew loved the story; and our equipment was working again.

The power of the UOD tactic is:

- Superior officers are always given respect, but their approval was not the gating factor for movement forward.
- The only time there is a “flap” (navy term for a lot of squawking) is when someone objects – which is quite seldom, and only after the job is already complete and everyone has moved to the next priority.
- Young leaders get a chance to take the initiative, get results *fast*, and have a sense of accomplishment.
- In the vast majority of cases, the outcomes from UOD are highly favorable, provided you think about the consequences before you act.

Tying people in knots and inflicting the pain of ineptitude is no way to run a ship. Traditional military command and control too often can have detrimental results, particularly where speed is a factor.

***It’s easier to ask forgiveness
after the fact than to ask
permission before the fact.***

I used the UOD method with the Grass Valley Group (GVG), an electronics company whose product was fast becoming obsolete. Their bureaucracy at the time required multiple sign-offs and cumbersome procurement procedures, along with a host of non-value added requirements. A cluster of champions inside GVG, utterly frustrated with the inaction, and recognizing the issue was strategic because the company’s future was at stake, decided to get the job done when all the bureaucrats were on summer vacation. We figured out how to get a new product developed and delivered with twice the performance in half the time at half the cost. None of the top brass seemed to pay attention to the UOD messages. When the team of product development champions announced their new product, the response was overwhelmingly positive – until the supply chain bureaucrats realized the new product champions broke virtually every standard procurement procedure! By then it was too late; the product was announced. Nevertheless, the battle of old guard versus the young turks continued for another year.

And it can suck the energy right out of people; something many leaders are loathe to acknowledge.

Collaborative Leadership Saves the Day

During the winter months of January and February 1972, our ship was operating out of Guantanamo Bay (known as Gitmo) for Operational Readiness training exercises. We were expected to push our ship to its limits on our first real “shakedown cruise,” testing its technical capabilities, as well getting our officers and crew working at peak performance. The readiness inspectors gave us high marks on the teamwork side. However, the massive complexity of our new warship required numerous adjustments, repairs, upgrades, and modifications – continuous innovation -- not just from the creators of the technology, but also in how we organized our people and enabled them to use and service all the equipment.

Unlike all the other officers on board, who tended to remain quite aloof from the enlisted men, I was the only officer who regularly intermingled with the crew and Chief Petty Officers (CPOs -- Navy’s version of Master Sergeants). I wasn’t worried about “fraternizing with the crew,” my role was more professional – taking care of my men.

Several days a week I sampled the crew’s food on the mess decks to be sure they were well cared for (which also gave me a chance to talk to the crew about a myriad of problems and solve them before they became a crisis).

Frequently I dropped in on the CPOs. Most of them were almost old enough to be my father. They always had an experienced opinion, and eventually learned that asking them questions and listening to their perspective was a valued leadership skill.

The best of the CPOs was a very salty old dog, Jerry Russell, the Chief of the Weapons Division, with 25 years in the Navy. On the surface, you would never expect us to become real teammates. Superficially we were diametrical opposites – he was rough around the edges, filled with colorful crass commentary, and held only a high school education. Yet I saw in him a man with astute of common sense, practical insight, and a strong, no-nonsense leader of men. Underneath this crusty demeanor was a man of deep commitment to his men.

A great team aligns its mission with the spirit of its people.

While we never stated it this way, Jerry Russell and I were connected at a very soulful level, too. His wife, Dotty, was pregnant and scheduled to deliver when we received orders to deploy to Gitmo for several months. Dotty was an exceptionally thin woman with delicate bone structure – she really wasn’t built to carry a child. She, like her husband, was a down to earth country gal from South Carolina with a distinct southern drawl and a cigarette dangling from her mouth. Dotty was certainly a fish out of water in the lofty sophisticated culture of Newport, Rhode Island, where our ship was home ported.

When we received our orders to deploy, Jerry confided in me that his wife was very concerned, as there were no other CPO wives who were living in Newport who could help her with her delivery and care for her afterwards.

I shared my concern with my wife, Ancelin, who was Dotty’s diametrical opposite: magna cum laude from Pembroke, and the daughter of a Harvard professor. While out at sea, Dotty delivered, Ancelin made sure Dotty was cared for and her child was loved. Jerry was relieved.

I did it because that’s what teamwork is about – taking care of your men. Every other CPO knew this was above and beyond an officer’s role, especially since Chief Russell was not my division’s CPO. I never told other officers about this special relationship, for that would only rankle them. However, things like this gave me a special access to all the CPOs.

They *trusted* me, and that was the “secret sauce” – the “grease” and the “glue” – the real basis of all the collaboration needed for high performance.

Beware of Limited Expectations

As a new class of ship, many sophisticated electronics, engineering, and weapons systems broke down under the intense loads we put on the new gear.

The Pentagon clearly recognized we needed substantial rework and upgrades, along with additional high-tech weaponry.

***Innovation is not simply technical:
it's really more a function of
human imagination.***

Upon returning to Newport, we got our orders to go to the Boston Naval Shipyard for extensive systems upgrades, including the installation of a Sea Sparrow Missile System.

When we received our orders to have our ship overhauled in the Boston Naval Shipyard, there were many groans from the senior officers, who knew that the Boston Yard was notorious for theft, cost overruns, union conflict, and almost never delivering on time, or even close to it. I discussed the problem with the “experts” on our ship closest to the problem with the greatest experience: the CPOs. They affirmed the problem with the yard-workers in Boston, who they referred to with the derogatory term “yard-birds.”

Being a native New Englander, I suggested we treat the yard-workers with the highest respect, make them part of our team, and find ways to make their jobs more fulfilling. Jerry Russell, who was highly regarded by his peers, supported this approach, giving some examples from his vast experience. Some of the Chiefs still skeptical, preferring to take the traditional hardline “kick ass and take names” approach.

Returning to the wardroom for an officers meeting addressing the upcoming work in the shipyard, the biggest issue was, expectedly, the rotten reputation of the Boston Yard. I noticed there were no Chief Petty Officers invited to the conference.

Our Executive Officer (XO) took the lead with an expected “we’ll let them know who’s boss,” and let’s “push them every day” with a “take no prisoners approach.” Each of the other officers joined in the chorus of bellow and bluster as the Captain listened with a stoic face.

When it became my time to chime in, I was the contrarian in the room. As I laid out a more collaborative strategy of cooperation and respect, I felt the razor edge of scornful looks from my fellow officers. They weren’t tuned to my wavelength. The XO rolled his eyes, signaling “no way.” I continued, addressing the Captain:

“Sir, my family is from the Boston area. These are strong willed people. Most of the yard workers are either Irish or Italian, and they are tough as nuts. They are unionized and all know how to fight. Tip O’Neal, Speaker of the House, is their godfather. Every other ship that’s come through this yard has had horrible results. Instead of rounding Cape Horn (referring to the arduous journey to the Pacific), let’s try a safer route; we have a lot at risk and nothing to gain by being tough and late.”

I suggested each of the Department Heads and Division Officers meet with their individual project managers representing the shipyard, build a relationship with them first, and all of us get to know the yard workers by first name. And, by no means, shall anyone ever be referred to as a “yard-bird!”

Then I suggested we carve out a portion of the mess decks reserved just for the yard workers, with a full pot of coffee, donuts, and snacks free of charge just for them – letting them know we thought of them as part of the team.

The senior officers were clearly antagonistic, the rest of my junior officer peers were non-committal.

After heated discussion, Captain Higginbotham finally spoke. He was unmoved by the tough guy attitude, supporting the idea of cooperation, stating that he had spent enough time in shipyards to know that “honey attracted more bees than vinegar.” He directed us to work with the yard like they were members of our team. Communications, coordination, and getting ahead of problems was paramount.

The collaborative strategy paid off. Soon the yard workers loved the friendly touch of eating their brown bag lunches on the mess decks. It wasn’t long before their cordoned section disappeared and they joined the crew discussing the Red Sox, the war, and figuring out how to make the repairs and installations go well.

We stayed on schedule to hit the target date right on the money – the first ship in a decade to pull off such a feat. It was a time of celebration, and before we left the yard the yard workers dug into their pockets and made a contribution of several hundred dollars to the crew’s recreational fund! No one had ever heard of such a thing.

Two weeks before we were destined to depart the yard, I was Command Duty Officer one night when the radioman knocked on my stateroom door – “Mr. Lynch, I have a top-secret message.” We knew immediately what it was – orders for our squadron to depart for Vietnam as soon as we left the yard.

Captain Higginbotham had been selected for a new command. We had a transfer of command ceremony just before we steamed toward the Pacific Ocean to the hail of all the officers and crew for his excellent leadership. We presented him with a painting of the *Trippe* my father had painted. I felt honored to have served with him; he taught me a lot, for which I am still grateful.



Painting of the USS Trippe in Boston Naval Shipyard by O'Hara

Breakdown

Installing new technologies in such a constricted space as a ship, where every cubic inch is crammed with wires, pipes, instruments, valves, and passageways is convoluted, complex, and complicated. Everything is interconnected. You can’t think about a component without understanding the entire system. It’s not just about the technology, it’s also just as much about the people. And if people don’t trust each other to work in a spirit of collaboration, everything becomes far more difficult and time consuming when people don’t contribute their ideas, holding back and blaming each other.

Our time in Boston was far from smooth sailing, but by joining our skills, talents, and creativity, the yard’s workers and our ship’s crew were a great team and got the job done where others had failed.

No matter what, there’s always some glitch, some obstacle, some unexpected hurdle. We overcame the difficulties together, and actually sometimes had some fun doing it.

Several weeks before the ship’s final inspection to clear us to leave the yard, the ship’s main anti-aircraft radar (SPS-40) went down. This is no trivial matter – it was our main defense for our Sea Sparrow missiles against air and missile attack in combat. The SPS-40, being a vacuum tube design, was notoriously sensitive to the vibration from shipboard gunfire.



SPS 40 Anti-Aircraft Radar Antenna

It had a range of 250 miles and was our central advanced early warning system. It was my responsibility to be sure it was fixed. The heart of the radar's transmitter – the klystron tube -- had blown out. The klystron tube was enormous, taking the larger proportion of the radar cabinet.



We didn't have a spare on board, so I contacted the nearest Supply Depot. No luck. In fact, there were no spares anywhere on the east coast – all spare klystrons were diverted to the war zone, halfway across the world. Much to my Captain's dismay, we had to send out a CasRep (Casualty Report), notifying the fleet of our deficiency. That didn't get us a klystron either.

Each morning the officers and crew mustered on the foredeck for divisional operational readiness reports. I was on the hot seat – every crewmember knew our anti-aircraft radar was our first line of defense in war, their lives were at stake, and their fate was in my hands.

Pressure Mounts as the Puzzle Palace Predominates

I had recently been promoted to Lieutenant, and thus was expected to perform magic. Every day I sent urgent messages for a new tube. Daily I was vexed by that confounding overloaded *Autovon* phone system that responded to my hourly attempts with a perpetual busy signal.

Our new Captain, Larry Lorden, was far less personable than his predecessor. Lorden made it clear that I had better solve the problem, and fast – no excuses. But he didn't give me any guidance on *how* to solve the problem.

Days and days passed, frustration built, and I still had no results. The officers and crew were giving me scornful looks. I felt like a prisoner in the Puzzle Palace's byzantine cage.

I recalled during officer training at Marine boot camp my drill sergeant blasting me with an edict about excuses: "Excuses are like ass***** -- we all have them and they all STINK!" I was becoming an excuse machine; and began hating myself for having no solution.

My father taught me that "A Complaint should be a Prelude to Action."

Here I was: complaining but with no action. Time had run out. We were scheduled to leave the yard the next day. No klystron on its way. I was desperate.

Breakthrough -- Cumshaw and a Midnight Raid

Whenever there's a breakdown, high performance leaders find a way to turn it into a breakthrough.

I needed a breakthrough fast, and was empty of any new ideas.

Chief Petty Officer Jerry Russell was my best resource. I sought him out in Chief's Quarters. He knew the ropes and was willing to move a few mountains with me. His Weapons Division was overseeing the installation of the Sparrow Missile Defense that connected to my anti-aircraft radar.

Together we concocted a strategy. Time was of the essence. Fortunately, between the two of us, we had the relationships, trust, and authority to bend (break) the rules in the name of our mission. One last "trick" – "Cumshaw" -- would be our salvation.

Cumshaw is an old Chinese word meaning "barter" or "exchange." It's common naval terminology to help grease the ways to get things done. Cumshaw is nowhere to be found in any official Navy standard operating procedure; it's a totally "off the books" process used to get around the cumbersome Puzzle Palace regulations. Without cumshaw, a boat-load of little things would never get done.

I went down to the mess decks and “requisitioned” twenty cases of coffee to be put on palettes on the fantail just after liberty call at 1600 hours when the ship’s officers and crew left for their last night at home. The coffee would be the “cumshaw” necessary to trigger our plan.

I had arranged to be Command Duty Officer (CDO) that night, relieving one of my fellow officers who was happy to spend another night with his wife before a long deployment.

Clandestinely, that morning Chief Russell and I met with the shipyard boss to request his assistance in the gambit. It needed to be carried out during the swing and graveyard shifts that night.



USS Voge -- the Unwitting Sacrificial Lamb

Fortunately, another ship from our squadron, the *USS Voge* (1047) had just entered the shipyard and was tied up across the pier before she went into dry-dock. She too had an SPS-40 radar system, which meant there was a klystron tube in its radar cabinet.

We struck a deal with the yard’s project supervisor: twenty cases of coffee in return for swapping our defective tube for the *Voge*’s functional tube. It all had to be done at night when nearly all their officers and crew were ashore, and the skeleton watch were watching television or enjoying a movie. Everything the yard workers did must look like their normal repair routines.

At 1800 hours, I ordered the twenty cases of coffee transferred from the fantail to the dock, then sat tight. By 2000 hours, I began making the rounds of the ship as CDO. The yard’s Electronics Technicians (ETs) were burrowing around our radar cabinet. I told them to help themselves to the coffee and donuts on the mess decks whenever they wanted to take a break.

On my next rounds between 2200 and 2400 hours, technicians were still working on the radar cabinets. All was well.

I walked into Combat Information Center (CIC) and saw the radar scopes (repeaters) making initial sweeps, indicating the ETs were starting the radar calibration. Walking up to the wing of the bridge, I could see the big radar antenna was beginning its rotations. Relieved, I went to my stateroom for a little sleep, asking the night watch to wake me at 0400 hours. Upon waking, again, I made my rounds, and checked in with the ETs (Electronics Technicians), who told me the radar was fully functional and all the systems had been calibrated. I thanked them profusely; I could finally breathe easy.



We were scheduled to cast off for the Panama Canal at 0800 hours, only four hours away. At 0700 hours, the officers and crew mustered on the foredeck for reports. When it came to my turn to deliver my operational readiness report, all eyes and ears were on me – was the radar working? I reported that everything was 100% operational, and pointed to the mast where the SPS-40 radar was making its sweeps across the morning mist. A collective sigh of relief could be heard across the foredeck. The Captain matter-of-factly acknowledged “Very well,” and moved on to the next report.

We singled up all lines, the tug and pilot came along side, precisely at 0800 hours we cast off, and began exiting Boston harbor. I went to the signal bridge and gave a symbolic salute toward the neighboring Charlestown Naval Yard, the home of the venerable *U.S.S. Constitution*, the old frigate that signified the great history of our beloved navy, as it faded into our wake and we prepared for open sea.

Then I went down to the radio room to send a message to our fleet commander notifying our ship’s radar was fully functional -- just as a “CasRep” message was received from *U.S.S. Voge*: “**Radar Down.**”



USS Trippe at sea in the North Atlantic in a light chop