

Equipping NAVSEA's Future Leaders

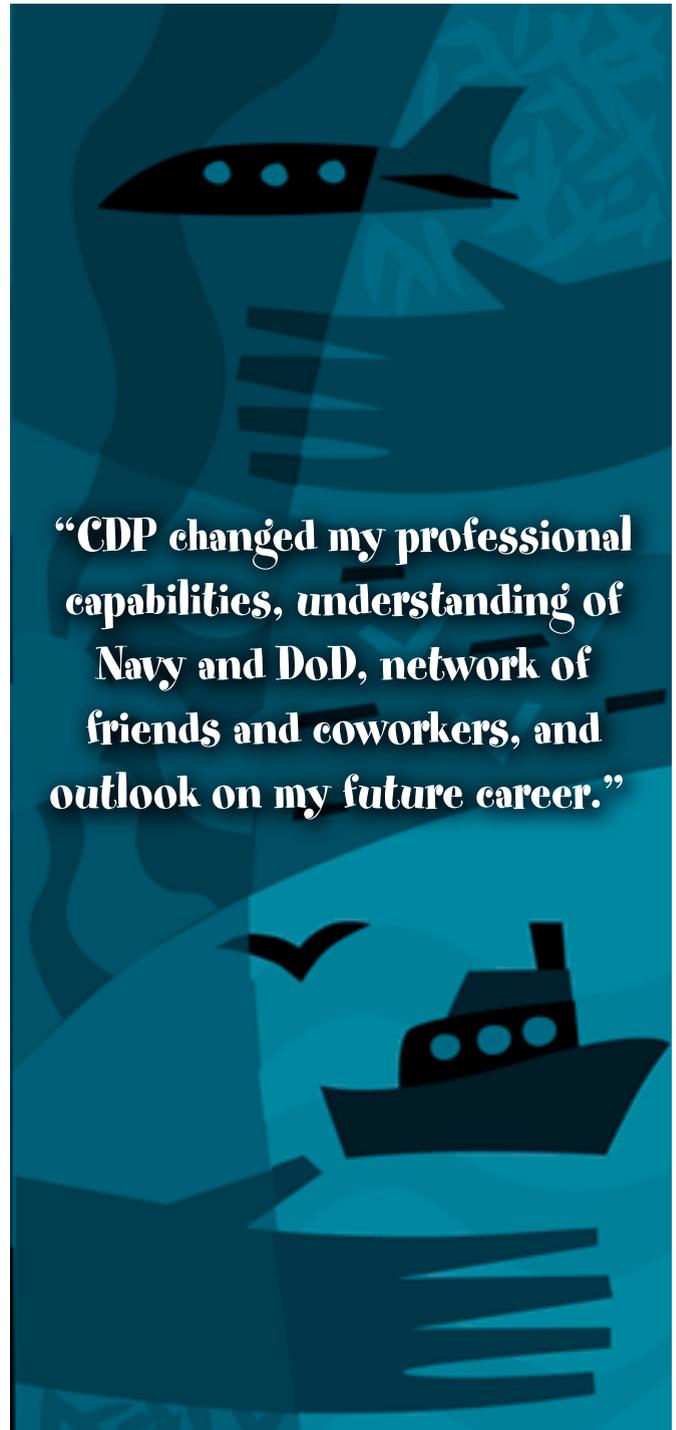
The Commander's Development Program

Matthew Tropiano Jr.

The Commander's Development Program (CDP), the Naval Sea Systems Command's premier full-time leadership development program, was established in May 1980 as part of NAVSEA's overall career-development strategy. It is a full-time, 28-month program involving a series of high-level rotational assignments, executive workshops, graduate-level educational experiences, and special tasks designed to expand participants' managerial and leadership abilities.

The goal of the CDP is to improve command mission success by investing in a select group of high-potential professionals who will feed into leadership positions throughout the command. The CDP is also an opportunity for NAVSEA employees to accelerate their careers and significantly increase their abilities to contribute to NAVSEA's mission and to contribute to their own self-development. The CDP provides the mentoring, training, education, executive experiences, and credentials necessary to be competitive for leadership positions throughout NAVSEA. By doing this, NAVSEA develops a pool of proven professionals who are ready to assume high-visibility leadership positions.

Upon completion of the program, graduates seek critical positions within the command and associated field activities. Some of the positions held by CDP graduates within the Department of the Navy and NAVSEA are deputy program executive officer for aircraft carriers; NAVSEA chief information officer; program manager, Submarine Depot Availability Program Office; deputy program executive officer, information technology for enterprise solutions; director of technical operations, Naval Surface Warfare Center; and technical director, Fleet Technical Support Center, Atlantic. Nine percent of the CDP graduate population is promoted each year. Approximately 200 employees have graduated from the program since its inception, and today those employees hold leadership positions throughout the Navy. In fact, 17 CDP graduates (9 percent) have achieved Senior Executive Service status, leading some to consider the Commander's Development Program an executive-level accelerated advancement program.



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Competitive Selection Process

The highly competitive selection factors for the CDP are knowledge of the applicant's professional field as it relates to the NAVSEA mission and the five executive core qualifications of the Senior Executive Service, described later. Before entering the program, applicants must have a superior knowledge and performance record within their job specialties. The CDP Board of Governors selects seven to 10 participants. Only applicants who, in the considered judgment of the Board of Governors, have outstanding potential for success in senior leadership positions will be accepted into the program.

NAVSEA's senior civilian and military leaders play an active role in the program. The NAVSEA executive director chairs the CDP Board of Governors, which is composed of NAVSEA Senior Executive Service members (SES-ers). The Board approves program policies that govern all aspects of CDP. Command SES-ers serve as mentors to CDP participants (CDP-ers) in the classic mentor-protégé relationship that has been identified as one of the most important elements of successful careers. The chosen mentor provides guidance to the participant in assessing abilities and career goals and in planning the development program. The mentor also assists the participant in negotiating with various organizations for high-level rotational assignments. Military leaders provide program guidance and rotational assignments to participants.

Indoctrination

CDP participants begin the program with an intensive eight-week indoctrination period—Indoc—during which time, they meet with the senior leadership of NAVSEA in a series of small-group meetings. These meetings allow for a candid interaction with senior officials and expand the participants' understanding of the scope and depth of NAVSEA's mission, and current issues and problems. During Indoc, participants select their mentors from the SES community.

Indoc includes a variety of executive workshops on leadership skills, covering topics such as briefing techniques and communication skills, human relations, negotiation techniques, managing transition, and performance development.

During Indoc, each participant completes an individual leadership development plan—ILDLP—for the balance of the program. The ILDP is crafted on the basis of the individual's and the command's needs, as identified by the participant, the program director, and the participant's mentor. The ILDP consists of high-level rotational assignments and formal courses that provide both developmental experiences and the knowledge and skills necessary to prepare the participant for leadership positions. The assignments and training will supplement

the participant's experience and prepare him or her for clearly articulated career goals.

Because key civilian leadership positions are critical to long-term command effectiveness and are both managerially and technically demanding, the mentor and program director identify the critical competencies each participant needs to develop, then they ensure that each participant achieves those competencies before completing the program. In this manner, CDP graduates are better prepared to fill key positions. Since the CDP is designed to prepare individuals for leadership positions and to improve their competitiveness for Senior Executive Service positions, the SES Executive Core Qualifications are an integral part of this program:

Leading Change—The ability to develop and implement an organizational vision that integrates key national and program goals, priorities, values, and other factors and includes striving to improve customer service and program performance; to create a work environment that encourages creative thinking; and to maintain focus, intensity, and persistence, even under adversity.

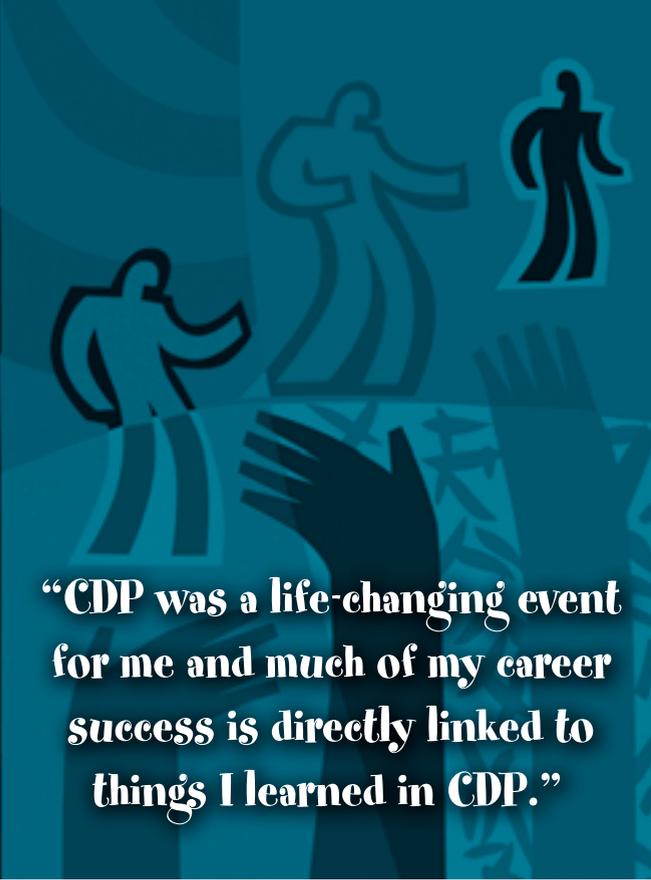
Leading People—The ability to design and implement strategies that maximize employee potential and foster high ethical standards in meeting the organization's vision, mission, and goals.

Results Driven—Stress accountability and continuous improvement including the ability to make timely and effective decisions and produce results through strategic planning and the implementation and evaluation of programs and policies.

Business Acumen—The ability to acquire and administer financial, material, and information resources. Business acumen also involves the ability to accomplish the organization's mission, to support program policy objectives, and to promote strategic vision.

Building Coalitions/Communication—The ability to explain, advocate, and express facts and ideas in a convincing manner, and negotiate with individuals and groups internally and externally.

These competencies, when matched against the participant's qualifications and capabilities, will serve to structure the participant's ILDP. A recent survey of program graduates showed that "learning new skills" had a significant impact on their experience and influenced their applying to the CDP program. Ninety-one percent of the CDP-ers who are now SES-ers said learning new skills was at least very important. Sixty-seven percent of new CDP-ers indicated that learning new skills was the number one reason for their applying. All those currently in the program indicated that learning new skills was very impor-



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tant. Eighty-nine percent of graduates indicated that learning new skills was *very* important.

One person surveyed commented, “The opportunities are not limited. You actually can spend two years developing yourself, your skills, and your vision for the future. The program works on all of these—not just one.” According to another student, “The skills I learned during Indoc and through rotations, as well as learning to think bigger (the big picture), have been key in my ability to do the job.”

Rotational Assignments

The participants select rotational assignments based on their backgrounds and career goals. Each participant selects a series of short-term (three- to six-month) rotational assignments designed to give the knowledge and experience necessary to understand and execute the responsibilities and operations of NAVSEA and the Department of the Navy. The CDP participant, rotational-assignment supervisor, mentor, and program director sign an agreement describing the developmental objectives and performance requirements of the assignment. An assignment can offer an intensive learning experience about the organization and its processes and is often outside the participant’s career specialty. Other assignments give participants supervisory experience as they fill vacant supervisory positions. A tour of duty at a field activity may broaden the perspective of those who have been based in headquarters during their careers. Many rotational-assignment opportunities are also available in offices outside the command—the Office of the Assistant Secretary

of the Navy (Research, Development and Acquisition), the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Fleet, and on Capitol Hill, for example.

Occasionally the commander, vice commander, or executive director will have a requirement to complete a short-term, high-priority project or to fill an important vacancy on an emergency basis while a recruiting action is under way. If such an assignment could be beneficial to both the command and the participant, a CDP participant may be asked to complete this “emerging requirement.” Upon completion of the rotational assignment, the CDP-er evaluates the rotational assignment, and the supervisor evaluates the CDP participant’s performance.

In the survey, 91 percent of the SES-ers indicated that rotational assignments were a very important or the most important component of the program, and 94 percent of all graduates indicated that rotational assignments were very important. One graduate expressed the desire for longer rotations. “The CDP rotational assignments provided about 15 years of exposure in three years,” said another graduate, while yet another commented, “Without a doubt, I would not be in this position had I not been in CDP. Being able to rotate through various offices and demonstrate my skills to others inside and outside of NAVSEA brought several long-term professional opportunities.”

Career Counseling

CDP-ers receive intense career counseling during the initial Indoc and throughout the 28-month program. During Indoc, participants conduct a self-assessment against the OPM Executive Core Qualifications as a means of identifying opportunities for improvement. The self-assessment is the primary means by which the participants, program director, and mentors develop the ILDP. In addition, participants are subjected to a number of standard instruments (such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) for various executive-level workshops, and a counselor or coach works with each participant in understanding what the results of those instruments mean relative to leadership styles. Throughout the program, participants are assessed for their (1) leadership, (2) performance during rotational assignments, and (3) difficulty of their development plans. The CDP-ers continue their relationships with their mentors long after program graduation.

Mentoring

All CDP-ers are required to have one official and two additional mentors who are members of the Senior Executive Service. Official mentors are responsible for approving ILDPs, approving rotational-assignment agreements, approving end-of-year bonuses, and providing counseling throughout the program. Official mentors are also responsible for participating in the successful placement of

CDP-ers upon graduation and maintaining the mentor-protégé relationship after the participant completes the program. Furthermore, SES-ers who are selected as primary mentors automatically become members of the CDP Board of Governors. The additional mentors provide the CDP-ers with additional support.

Formal Training

Concurrent with rotational job assignments, participants complete independent study, university courses, government-sponsored courses, seminars, and specially developed courses tailored to augment their work experiences.

Leadership Development

Leadership development is the ultimate purpose of the Commander's Development Program. In addition to executing their ILDPs, participants are expected to get involved in extracurricular activities that support the command and/or the community, such as volunteering for various task forces, special projects, professional societies, or community programs.

Collateral Duty

Special task groups may be formed to analyze command problems and propose solutions on a wide variety of important subjects. CDP participants play a major role as team leaders or team members in these challenging assignments.

Program Completion

To determine eligibility for graduation, the primary mentor and program director evaluate CDP-ers using such criteria as fulfilling the objectives identified in the ILDP, including Acquisition Workforce Certification at Level III. Upon receiving the mentor's and program director's recommendations, the executive director will make the final decision on a participant's readiness to graduate. CDP participants may be eligible for early graduation only with the approval of the executive director. The CDP-er, mentor, and program director then work collaboratively on the successful placement of the CDP-er.

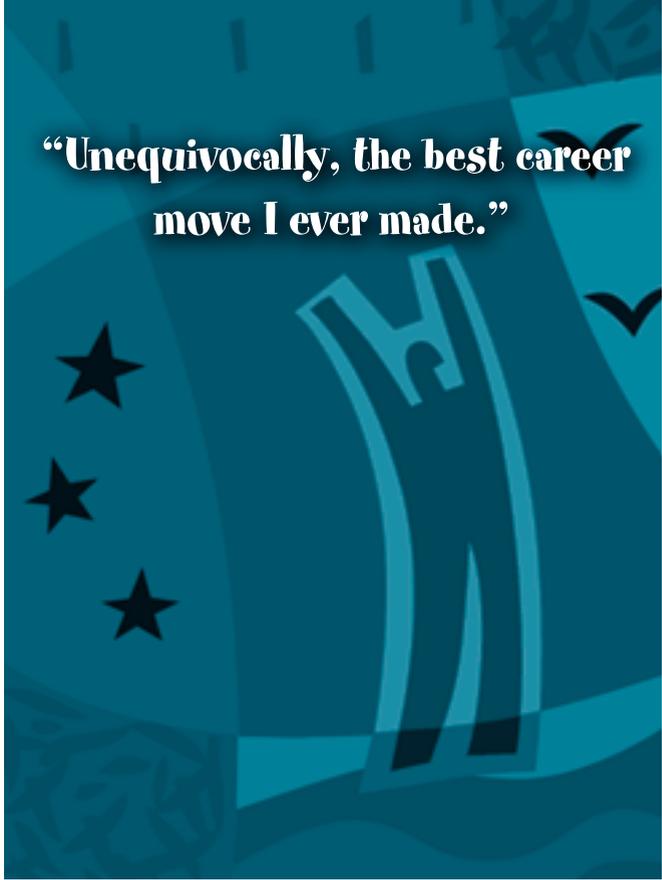
Networking

One hundred percent of those currently in the program, 64 percent of CDP-ers who are SES-ers, and 77 percent of graduates indicated that networking was very important.

"Once you have completed the CDP program, you are no longer an individual within the NAVSEA enterprise, you are part of a tightly woven network of highly placed and highly regarded professionals," said one participant.

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One hundred percent of the SES-ers and those currently in the program would recommend the program to others, as would 97 percent of all graduates. One SES-er re-



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ported that he is now working at the Department of Homeland Security and trying to implement a similar program. Several respondents cited the CDP program as the most important step in their careers. “It was the most important undertaking of my career. It changed my professional capabilities, understanding of Navy and DoD, network of friends and coworkers, and outlook on my future career,” said one CDP-er. “Unequivocally, the best career move I ever made,” commented another.

Several CDP-ers asserted that the CDP had directed and defined their career, and one graduate said CDP had been “immeasurably” career-defining, going on to say, “CDP was a life-changing event for me and much of my career success is directly linked to things I learned in CDP and people I met throughout CDP.” Another said, “The education alone has been worth every moment of my time. I earned two promotions within four years of completing the program.”

Through interviews and statistical analyses, it is clear that CDP is accomplishing its mission and playing a vital role in developing leaders for the benefit of NAVSEA and beyond—the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Marine Corps, and elsewhere.

The author welcomes comments and questions. Contact him at matthew.tropiano@navy.mil. For specific program information, contact the program manager at ronald.rothberg@navy.mil.