**The Changing Face of a 21st Century Divisional Officer**

byNovember 1, 2018

**Modern day Service Personnel have modern day needs; how does the Divisional Officer help?**

This article is designed to provoke thought and self-reflection; thought on what the needs are of our Service personnel but also to inspire reflection on our own actions as Divisional Officers.  How does what we do affect those we are responsible for and is there any way we can improve this?  This is not an article designed to challenge current policy and nor is it a basis for a thesis on leadership, it is merely the thoughts of a serving Divisional Officer who perhaps spends too much time thinking about others.

**The formal guidance:**

*“Your role as a Divisional Officer is just as important as your primary role in your Ship, boat, squadron or unit.  You should regard it as a great privilege to be entrusted with leading your people, shaping their careers and helping them deliver their full potential.  You must give your divisional duties high priority and take pride in knowing your people as well as you can.  It is fundamental to good leadership; your personal face-to-face engagement with your Division is crucial to making our people feel valued and part of winning a team.  The Naval Service invests enormous time and resource to train everyone to the highest standard and therefore doing everything you can to help retain our people in the Service should be at the forefront of your daily activity.”*

*-The Divisional Officer’s Handbook*

**What does a Divisional Officer do?**

Both the Divisional Officer (DO) Handbook and Divisional Senior Rate Handbook give guidance and policy on the administrative function of a DO; joining interviews, Servicepersons Joint Appraisal Report (SJAR), warnings, Accused Assisting Officer (AAO), Divisional Meetings etc.  But by only completing the administrative elements, does this make you an effective DO?  The introduction from the Divisional Officer’s Handbook outlines the magnitude of responsibility bestowed upon a Divisional Officer (DO), which includes doing everything we can to assist in the retention of our people.

I want to explore the tasks which aren’t written down in a handbook, the tasks where you receive no formal training and are completely reliant on your own leadership skills and ability to build rapport and trust with another person.  What options do you have when the behaviour of someone in your Division changes drastically for no conceivable reason, affecting their professional performance, or when someone goes through an emotional period (starts a family, becomes ill, divorce, bereavement) and refuses to allow you to signpost them to a Doctor, Chaplain or Royal Navy Royal Marines Welfare (RNRMW)?  Although DOs are encouraged to signpost at any opportunity and allow the Service Person (SP) to receive the correct help, how do you help them when they won’t help themselves?

With a high degree of professional pressure and responsibility, it is easy to allow administrative tasks to slide down the priority list when there is no direct link to their operational output or success.  Something as simple as “walking your patch” (Department or Division) and engaging with members of your team can have a great effect on how or when they approach you for support or guidance.  This can take you away from your core role for hours, but the rapport and relationship you build with your people can be the difference between preventing a Divisional (N1) problem or supporting a SP in their hour of need.

There is no policy on how long a DO must spend on their administrative tasks, the onus is on them to manage their time and professional commitments.  Does it make a difference if a DO spends 6 hours writing a SJAR, or 20?  What about the delivery or the SJAR, is it appropriate to take the SP for a cup of coffee and read it to them, whilst discussing your reasons for the selected performance grades based on the evidence of their professional performance?  There are some DOs who merely upload it to Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) and instruct the SP to accept it.  Would the SP feel more valued if you took the time to deliver the SJAR verbally?  Would this increase their feeling of loyalty to the Service, knowing that their DO is invested in their professional development and therefore quite possibly contributing to their retention (critical in some branches).  Of course the flip side of this is that as a 1 or 2 Reporting Officer (RO) we should not have to justify what we deem satisfactory SJAR content, especially if there is a disagreement.  But small changes to the way we manage and lead our people can have a marked impact on the morale of a SP.

**Modern needs of Service Persons**

I recently read an article on an interview from a member of HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH’s Ship’s Company (where the overwhelming majority of Junior Rates are straight from training and in the age bracket of 18-25), who was asked what he would miss most about being sea.  His response was “Snapchat”.  Unfortunately, this response received a lot of negative comment across social media platforms.  But why?  As a young man born in the Y-Generation, why shouldn’t he be entitled to miss social media.  He has always known the ability to stay connect 24/7 and thanks to technology, we no longer need to wait for a respite in operational activity to receive a mail drop to receive our monthly letter from home.  When serving on Towed Array Patrol Ship/Fleet Ready Escort (TAPS/FRE) unit, the quickest reduction in morale is when the River City State changes and external emails are switched off.  How is Snapchat any different?  I wonder if there would have been as much negativity if he answered the question by stating he will miss receiving daily photos of his new born child via social media.

Separation anxiety in relationships (and for families) and the impact of Service life on family and personal life remains the top reason for SP to leave the Service with 74% of Service leavers citing this reason last year (Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (AFCAS) 2017).  Technology has fuelled this anxiety by allowing us to be permanently connected, so we notice the affects greater once we lose the ability to text, Tweet or FaceTime.  The RN is striving to combat this anxiety by introducing simple and effective changes, such as WiFi on Ships which allow SP to remain connected whilst at sea.  Additionally, all units are encouraged to set up a social media account so families and friends can monitor the progress and activity of that unit.  However, the RN must continue to take “being connected” seriously, ensuring it is accessible to everyone; and stop mocking the new generation of SP whose lives are based on technology.

**‘Walking the Patch’: more relevant than ever before**

A lifelong career in the Services isn’t always the number one priority for a SP; 3 badge ABs aren’t as common as they were two decades ago.  We have a generation of SP with complex needs, families and ambitions which require DOs to think outside of a handbook.  We need to be invested in our people and know what their motivators are; what effect their lives have on their professional output, what are their external influences and drivers.  So yes, someone from your Division might get arrested for drink driving and summoned to Magistrates Court, but did you know they were in the midst of a painful divorce and had just driven 200 miles to see their child but turned away on a whim?  This of course is no justification, but the Divisional care and support that SP needs greatly extends beyond an AAO.  But did their DO have a good rapport with them, investing time to listen and support and signpost, potentially preventing this incident from occurring in the first place?  Or did the DO merely accept a pleasant exchange a couple of times a week and assume they were a naturally isolated person and not very talkative.

**Old problems and new – but less tolerance for both!**

The demands we place can be severe for the SP and their; long deployments, no communications, long working days, demanding secondary and tertiary roles, no guarantee of attending that event you spent a year planning (I have known people to postpone their own weddings as leave cannot be granted).  For SP who aren’t based on a sea going unit, the scale of workload whilst shore side can dominate the time they spend at home.  Because now we have work laptops and iPhones designed to keep us connected to our inbox.

Whilst the demands have not changed over the years, the social appetite for acceptance is diminishing and SP are no longer beholden to the Service for opportunities or a career.  I believe the DO can do more to manage the effect Service life has on our people.  We all have N1, but how much support do we give people?  Knowing the difference between “I’m okay” and “I’m okay” is something I consider crucial to knowing whether someone in my Division is happy and engaged in their work or whether there is something happening in the N1 background which may need some attention.  There are DOs who focus on their core role and Divisional responsibilities are fulfilled from an administrative perspective.  This does not make them an ineffective DO or unable to engage with their Division, but we all have a responsibility to develop potential and lead people and it’s up to us to accept this responsibility into our professional culture.

**Can we do more?**

There are always new and innovative ways to improve the ethos of an organisation and adapt the current best working practice and move it forward with current social attitudes.  However, there is no policy which could cover all conceivable possibilities of Divisional/N1 needs; consequently, we have wonderful organisations such as RNRMW and the Chaplaincy.  Correct sign posting is crucial to the overall well-being of a SP going through a challenging time, but there are measures we could implement at the lowest level, daily interaction and attitude, which could have a marked impact on the morale of a SP and how they perceive their care and support in Service.

There are drastic measures which would require additional resource and funding, such as the implementation of a whole Ship Divisional Officer on every sea going unit (akin to a RNRMW social worker).  Whilst the Executive Warrant Officer (EWO) is a useful N1 point of contact, ultimately they have additional Executive and secondary roles which prevent their focus from being solely on Divisional support.  Imagine offering every SP the ability to have a cup of tea and conversation about their concerns which are distracting them from their core role, with someone equipped emotionally and mentally to support them?  The Chaplaincy service would be perfectly positioned for this role, however not every sea going unit is assigned a permanent Chaplain and some units are only frequented a few days a term, which is not sufficient to build rapport with a SP.

Or what about the creation of a Divisional course designed for Junior Rates (instead of starting at the Senior Rate level)?  This would allow pastoral care and support to be provided officially from peers, not necessarily by a person with rank.  Whilst Junior Rates would not carry the responsibility of the administrative Divisional tasks, they could be taught; how to recognise signs of depression, coping mechanisms, support techniques, signposting methods, how to establish a carers forum, motivational coaching techniques etc.

After reading the Autumn 2018 People Brief, I was delighted to see a submission from the Command Warrant Officer Surface Ships (CWOSS) sharing suggestions on how some units are addressing N1 concerns.  From monthly DO meetings, N1 discussions with the EWO and encouraging DOs to conduct daily walk rounds of their patches, it is wonderful to see that units and Command teams are allowing DOs to make extra provisions to fulfill their responsibilities by making N1 a priority.

**Summary**

Modern day needs place constraints on our SP which we must accept sometimes reduces their ability to perform as we need them to.  There are simple, but highly effective, methods a DO can use to further support their Division.  The door may always be open, but how long can someone loiter making small talk before they are invited inside to talk or ask for support?

Time – always in short supply, but never wasted when applied to care of those under your command.

The administrative aspects of being a DO can sometimes consume much of our time, but this should not detract from our ability to know and understand who our SP are and support them throughout their Service.  Whilst not completing the administrative actions is not an option, should we make the basics a priority so we can show our dedication to our role as a DO?  And how much time “walking the patch” is too much?  Personally, if I have to sit up until 2100 to catch up with a day’s work because I spent the morning engaging with a member of my Division or walking around the Department; that is a choice I make.  And I am comfortable with that.  Because I know the return which the Service and I receive from that individual is greater than making sure my inbox is cleared by 5pm.  But equally, time is a luxury I have.  There are many DOs who have their own N1 and it must be challenging to manage your core role and your Divisional duties when you have your own family to consider.  I humbly admire those in Service who are able to make this balance work.

Divisional Officers are not counselors, or therapists.  But we are human.  We all have the ability to sit and listen, to connect with another human and determine whether their N1 has an adverse effect on Operational Capability.  Is it fair to signpost them at the first opportunity towards RNRMW?  Although not everything can be solved by DOs spending more time with their people and taking time to support them emotionally and mentally, but whilst RN morale is at its lowest since AFCAS was created in 2007 there must be something more we can do holistically to improve their Service experience.  I believe with simple changes to our daily practice; we can do more to support our people, regardless of rank.