

The Inventory Speaks

By CAPT Andy Makar, USNR

On 28 March 2005, Commander Naval Reserve Forces Command (COMNAVRESFORCOM) sent out a personal message entitled “Stemming the Tide of Losses.” The P4 message was addressed to all commanders, commanding officers, and command master chiefs. The issue is a real one, with real consequences for the Naval Reserve. Let me be the first to say that I fully support the goal of retaining the quality officers and Sailors that we are fortunate to have serving with us.

Yet despite this worthy goal, the message highlighted a very real problem in the Naval Reserve. In an effort to be relevant, we borrow the wrong lessons from civilian industry. Instead of relying on the great traditions of leadership that this two-hundred-year-plus institution has developed, we look to the latest and greatest management fad. Unfortunately, the current industry fad is to treat everything as commodities, including people.

Language is important. What we say and the words we use tell the world how we look at individuals. This message is no different. We used to talk about our men, our troops, our fellow Sailors. These fine individuals were real people. Now we speak of them as “human capital.”

I suppose we should be somewhat grateful. After all, capital at least equates us with money; and money has real value. It surely beats being “human resources,” which evokes the image of SoyLent Green. But, it is still pretty impersonal. Instead of being individuals, we are just another part of the machine.

But being referred to as “human capital” isn’t the worst indignity this message sends. No, in the very next sentence, we are told of the challenge of maintaining inventory. This leaves me to wonder where I fall in the pecking order. I suppose Sailors are somewhere

on the shelf between rope and shoes.

If the highest levels of our leadership look at our Sailors as “human capital” and inventory, then our retention problems are going to be bigger than we can imagine. Several years ago, I had the honor of being mobilized. During my year of active duty, I noticed some interesting differences between reserve sailors and their active duty counterparts.

For one thing, Reservists tend to be somewhat older. Within a month of mobilization, I was told to send personnel age 26 and under for driver training. I had exactly one Sailor in fifty who met these criteria; and if I put it off for a month, he would have been over 27 and exempt from the requirement.

Another significant difference was the Reservist’s education and life experience. Many of my enlisted personnel had bachelor degrees. Several had graduate degrees, including one petty officer who had two master’s degrees. Some had leadership roles in their own civilian organizations, and a few owned their own businesses.

In short, the average Reservist has not been restricted to the military environment and has not become used to the bureaucratic tendencies of the service. More importantly, they know how to read between the lines, and they most definitely think for themselves. I’m not sure that they would appreciate being equated with widgets.

So, while I appreciate the concerns that “Stemming the Tide of Losses” addresses, I will not under any circumstance actually post this thing anywhere. And, I respectfully suggest that our leadership take this widget’s advice and think just a little harder about the words they use. 🗨️