

# Ka-Bar Leadership Course

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Cohort 4 ~Team 1~Capstone Project

## Mid-level Management & Leadership

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## Abstract

This project will attempt to:

- Define who mid-level managers are,
- Identify perceived confusions and differences between senior and mid-level managers,
- Recommend strategies for successful engagement of mid-level managers with the workforce, and
- Suggest methods to empower mid-level managers to accomplish organizational objectives and goals.

Senior management, within Marine Corps Intelligence (MCI), identified the preceding as areas of concern.

For the purposes of this project, it is assumed mid-level managers are categorized, at minimum, as first-level supervisors.

The group developed a survey of thirteen questions to specifically engage the military and civilian workforce at several locations throughout the Marine Corps. The purpose of the survey was to identify perceived gaps and assumptions between the two management levels. Twenty-six surveys provide the basis for findings, from a total of sixty surveys distributed, providing a 43.5% response rate. The responses provide the information to allow a review of the aforementioned hypotheses and assumptions. After reviewing the responses, it is possible to provide recommendations to senior management in the areas identified for development.

## Introduction

The Ka-Bar Leadership Development Initiative was designed to “prepare new supervisors and emerging leaders to effectively lead their teams, meet the organization’s mission, retain staff, and prepare for leadership succession” (Ka-Bar Leader Development Participant Guide, 2011, p. 4). The key enabler in leadership preparation and meeting management objectives lies in supervisors’ and emerging leaders’ abilities to understand what leadership is and where they fit within the management spectrum. Definitions of leadership are readily available; supervisors’ and emerging leaders’ place and authorities within the management spectrum requires more exploration.

Merriam-Webster (2004) defines leadership as the “office or position of a leader; capacity to lead; the act or instance of leading”. This definition provides foundation. To add context, military services provide their expectations for leadership:

- The United States Army (2006) defines leadership as the process of “influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation, while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization” (FM 6-22, p. 1-2).
- The United States Air Force (2006) has a similar definition. It defines leadership as “the art and science of influencing and directing people to accomplish the assigned mission” (AFDD 1-1, p. 1).
- The United States Marine Corps (USMC) (1995) draws its understanding of leadership from the eleven Marine Corps Leadership Principles and fourteen Marine Corps Leadership Traits (FMFM 1-0, p. 91). The Marine Corps Leadership Principles and Traits follow:

| <b>Principles</b>                               | <b>Traits</b>        |
|---|----------------------|
| <b>Know yourself and seek self-improvement;</b> | <b>Dependability</b> |

|   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| <b>Be technically and tactically proficient;</b>                          | <b>Bearing</b>       |
| <b>Develop a sense of responsibility among your subordinates</b>          | <b>Courage</b>       |
| <b>Make sound and timely decisions</b>                                    | <b>Decisiveness</b>  |
| <b>Set the example</b>  | <b>Endurance</b>     |
| <b>Know your Marines and look out for their welfare</b>                   | <b>Enthusiasm</b>    |
| <b>Keep your Marines informed</b>   | <b>Initiative</b>    |
| <b>Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions</b>       | <b>Integrity</b>     |
| <b>Ensure assigned tasks are understood, supervised, and accomplished</b> | <b>Judgment</b>      |
| <b>Train your Marines as a team</b>                                       | <b>Justice</b>       |
| <b>Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities</b>            | <b>Knowledge</b>     |
|   | <b>Tact</b>          |
|   | <b>Unselfishness</b> |
|   | <b>Loyalty</b>       |

These qualities of thought and action, if demonstrated in daily activities, help Marines and Civilian Marines earn the respect, confidence, and loyal cooperation of other Marines and Civilian Marines.

Leadership and management are separate but required for success; both leverage the other, but are distinct skills and talents. Characteristics of successful managers can be to administer, maintain, control, and imitate. Characteristics of leaders can be to innovate, develop, inspire, originate, and challenge.

Leadership is the focal point of both Ka-Bar and this topic exploration, referring to “the art of influencing an individual or a group of people to reach a common goal” (Ka-Bar Leadership Certificate Program, 2011).

## **The Challenge: Mid-level Managers**

An unexpected challenge to this topic exploration was identifying who mid-level managers were and where they serve within the organization. To gain a better understanding of the challenges, the group contacted Ms. Karin Dolan, Defense Senior Intelligence Leader (DSIL), to assist in narrowing focus and provide a better understanding of what senior leadership identified as topics to address. For background, research reveals a struggle persists between mid-level management and senior levels of management in the workforce in a preponderance of large organizations (Tompkins, 2005 & Northouse, 2007). Unless this gap is recognized and addressed, leadership at any level will suffer.

Ms. Dolan, (2011), indicated during previous Ka-Bar Cohort briefings to senior MCI Enterprise leaders, mid-level management was highlighted as an area of concern. She expressed the assertion that mid-level managers needed to “engage the workforce on benefits, performance management, and the Marine Corps Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance -Enterprise (MCISR-E).” In addition, Ms. Dolan expressed another concern, “we can see that we haven't been clear with them [mid-level managers] as to expectations so there's uneven dissemination of information, materials, and other important communications across the organization.” This project endeavored to address this concern.

## Methodology

The survey results provide the basis for this project and were conjugated amongst the group.

Each member drafted a list of questions that related to mid-level management; some tied into interactions with senior level management. After questions were drafted and reviewed for duplication and relativity, consensus was attained as to which questions would be employed and their order to ensure respondents would have a uniform flow and provide the most meaningful answers possible. Each question was reviewed to ensure open-endedness.

In developing the methodology for recommending strategies to improve mid-level management engagement, the group used the following as hypotheses:

- Confusion persists as to who mid-level managers are,
- Mid-level managers are not adequately engaging the workforce is a perception, and
- Mid-level management is critical to the success of an organization

The group crafted the survey regarding previously stated assumptions, from mid-level and senior managers and to analyze the results to prove or disprove the assumptions and solicit meaningful responses. This approach provided a foundation upon which to identify mid-level management issues and make recommendations for improvement.

The first question to address was “who is mid-level management?” It was immediately apparent that within the group, it was difficult to clearly define who was included in mid-level management, thus we identified the following assumptions:

- Mid-level managers appeared to be considered first-level supervisors,
- A lack of communication between management levels is evident, and
- Clear understanding of expectations and responsibilities lacks.

Potential mid-level management opportunities presented themselves, leading the group to ask further questions:

- Are middle managers given an appropriate level of responsibility?
- Are middle managers prepared for the responsibilities they are given?
- Are middle managers properly trained to perform their jobs?
- Is communication effective between management levels?

The survey was distributed to both mid-level and senior level managers, to include military and civilian, throughout the Marine Corps, not solely within MCI. The participants were randomly selected according to each surveyor's respective chain of command. No attempt to ensure statistical significance or follow a scientific method occurred. The intent was to gather perceptions, opinions, and assumptions from a number of managers and use information to identify common themes. In some cases, the common theme was a nearly unanimous lack of agreement.

The following table identifies the groups and responses from the survey:

| <b>ORGANIZATION</b> | <b>SURVEYED</b> | <b>RESPONSES</b> |
|---------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| MCI                 | 46              | 22               |
| HQMC C4 CY          | 5               | 1                |
| MCB Camp<br>Lejeune | 1               | 1                |
| Camp Pendleton      | 2               | 0                |
| MCNOSC              | 6               | 2                |

## Results

The results survey included responses from the following organizations: Marine Corps Intelligence Activity (MCIA), Headquarters Marine Corps Cyber Security Division (HQMC CY), Marine Corps Network Operations and Security Command (MCNOSC), and Marine Corps Base (MCB) Camp Lejeune. The results from the survey demonstrated lack of consensus on who mid-level management is.

The preponderance of respondents self-identified as mid-level management, though some identified themselves as senior. In some cases, it appeared as though pay grade/level and/or the level of authority determined the self-perception rather than their actual position in chain of command. One specific response addressed the following when asked to define mid-level management: “What you see is determined by where you sit;” this was thematic in most responses. Generally, the responses reflected a perception of self-identified, mid-level management, and respondents expressed they were comfortable with their place and how they saw themselves within their organization. Overall, the majority viewed senior leadership as any grade of a 15 or higher, such as Senior Executive Service (SES).

An area of the survey explored the responsibilities mid-level managers were assigned or perceived they were given, including aspects such as authority and compensation. Diverse answers were provided. Some expressed the feeling they were compensated appropriately as well as given appropriate workload and responsibility. A few, however, expressed their workload was greater, as was their responsibility and supervisory responsibility compared with their peers, and, further, may be expecting different skills and responsibilities of themselves than those of their peers.

From those responses, it appeared section heads may be in this mid-level management type of position due to his/her subject matter expertise and experience, rather than management skill. One respondent reported: “Compared to other individuals at my level, within my organization, I have too much responsibility.” Given this response, it may be worth exploring the management style of this employee, whether he/she is misinterpreting role or if, indeed, this is an appropriate fit for this employee. Another explanation for this may be a predisposition for micromanaging rather than teaching, which may alleviate some stress expressed.

One response went as far as to explain this as “there is not too much responsibility on managers; it is just out of balance”. This person discussed the administrative burden and how it was far more than a manager should endure as there is little to no return on investment when spending more time doing these time consuming efforts.

From a military standpoint, one response stated, “Yes, as Marines, we have a culture of doing more with less and expect it, meaning we work harder, but we gain some efficiencies in improved communication....and with more responsibility it is very empowering.” That response seemed to be the opposite end of the spectrum of another; “I think they [mid-level managers] are given the responsibility but not the authority to be effective. The civilian labor laws make it extremely difficult to actually manage in certain cases.”

Many responses that indicated a more accepting role of where they stood in their organization in terms of responsibility: “Compared to others at my level, I am given enough responsibilities to oversee my day to day duties,” and, “I feel that we are provided with more than enough responsibilities, however, due to the organization being top-heavy, mid-level managers aren’t provided workers to manage directly.” Overall, responses were disparate from one side of the spectrum to the other in terms of how the respondents perceived their workload

and responsibility levels. Of particular note was a question regarding the top three responsibilities of mid-level managers. Respondents who self-identified as senior managers achieved concurrence on what they perceived to be the top three responsibilities as:

- Accomplish mission
- Prioritize production
- Support subordinates/know your people/leadership

Respondents who self-identified as mid-level managers, showed great variance in their responses:

*Asset management, subject-matter expertise, future production, provide budget, resources, support, motivate employees, review process and adjust as necessary, prioritize production, motivation, daily operations, mentoring analysts, administrative, understand mission, prioritize production, future production/achieve vision, people, mission accomplishment, human resources, quality control of production, prioritize production, know people and their capability, analyze and problem solve, prioritize production, money, leadership, prioritize production.*

Given the disparity in responses shown above, between these two groups, the assumption made earlier in this paper that mid-level and senior level managers do not share a common understanding of expectations has shown to be true.

Compensation was also discussed within these survey questions as well. The majority expressed satisfaction with their compensation. Generally, the respondents expressed happiness with their jobs and generally enjoyed doing it. It seemed as though from the responses, it was a general consensus that the mission and people were highly regarded as important and above all that was the forefront of the individual perceptions. Without the people, the mission would not get accomplished. Therefore, the need to ensure to some extent, the overall happiness and avenues to fulfillment were integral to the success of the organization.

## Recommendations

MCIA and other USMC components would be well served to define who middle managers are and their expectations of them. The survey administered was intentionally open-ended, and the respondents' self-identification with mid-level and senior level management provided insight to the Capstone group.

A firm grasp of how much autonomy was afforded or expected was lacking in the respondents' responses who self-identified as mid-level management; not so with senior-level. The respondents who self-identified as senior level had almost congruent responses as to their expectations of mid-level managers. Those who self-identified as mid-level, however, responded disparately, as detailed in the previous section.

Generally accepted responsibilities of management include the following:

- Planning
- Directing
- Controlling
- Staffing
- Organizing

The mid-level managers, given their responses, have taken on all of them, though expressed frustration on the training and guidance they receive to attain success at them. The Ka-Bar program attempts to address the leadership of managing, but the actual science and art of management is not a focus in the curriculum. It is the recommendation of the group to leverage successful training avenues to address this deficiency and develop a management track for its workforce.

The responses of the survey identified another noteworthy trend. Mid-level managers achieve success not through process, but through individual heroics. They routinely react to challenges and often meet with success, but they are ill equipped to repeat the success. Though the immediate success is worthy of praise, it highlights a lack of institutionalization of processes, forcing middle managers to remain in a reactive posture rather than to position themselves for future challenges. It is the recommendation of this project that we pursue process improvements, in a methodical manner, to provide managers the toolkit it needs to meet challenges, mission, and future opportunities.

Further recommendations follow in response to survey responses:

- **Senior Managers**: define responsibilities; over-communicate (provide many avenues for communication); provide information and answer questions; over-answer questions; understand the enterprise, strategic goals, and provide guidance but not as a punch sheet; set high standards and reward small victories toward larger goals; let people make mistakes and help them learn from them; lead by example
- **Middle Managers**: listen and learn; ask many questions; take risks; delegate; guide; become proficient at basic skills such as administrative tasks and prioritizing work, which will gain time to concentrate on greater challenges; lead.

The Marine Corps has a highly talented and motivated workforce at all levels. The respondents to the Capstone survey expressed a laudable sense of mission and loyalty to their organizations. Given training, mentorship, and encouragement, mid-level managers would have the tools they need to better engage the workforce and meet the management and leadership challenges for the coming decades.

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# Ka-Bar Leadership Course

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## Cohort 4 ~Team 1~Capstone Project Survey

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This survey was prepared in support of our group capstone project focused on middle management. We are using the results of this survey to:

- Define middle management
- Identify perceptions of mid-level managers
- Identify ways to strengthen middle management
- Identify possible communication strategies at the management levels

Please complete the following survey questions and return them to one of the above group members no later than the close of business on Wednesday, 01 June 2011.

If you have any questions about this survey please contact any of the group members.

We thank you for your participation and appreciate your candid responses.

**NOTE: THE RESULTS OF THIS SURVEY WILL REMAIN CONFIDENTIAL AND ONLY BE USED TO IDENTIFY TRENDS AND COMMONALTIES. YOU WILL NOT BE IDENTIFIED PERSONALLY OR BE ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR RESPONSES.**

1. How would you define mid-level management? Do you consider yourself senior or mid-level manager?
  
2. Do you feel that mid-level managers are properly compensated for the amount of work you do? Please provide a brief explanation.
  
3. Do you feel mid-level managers are given too much or not enough responsibility within the organization compared to others at your level? Please provide a brief explanation.
  
4. Name the top three responsibilities of a middle manager. Be as specific or generic as you like.
  
5. Do you think middle managers are prepared well for the responsibilities you identified in the preceding question? Please extrapolate.
  
6. How do you feel the communication is between management and leadership within your organization and what would you suggest to improve the communications lines between the two?
  
7. How do you feel your organization compares to others within the Marine Corps in terms of how management and leadership are viewed and incorporated throughout the organization?

8. Do you think your chain of command values technical, subject-matter expertise more strongly than managerial skill? Please provide a brief explanation.
  
9. Do you feel as though mid-level managers are properly trained and/or provided the avenue to obtain the training to perform their jobs?
  
10. Is there a professionalization track for mid-level and senior managers? What should that track look like?
  
11. If you could identify the greatest strengths of the middle management corps of your organization's enterprise, what would they be?
  
12. What actions do you recommend to get mid-level managers to positively engage the workforce?
  
13. Do you feel as though the organization as a whole focuses on the "people" and the mission or just the mission? Please provide a brief explanation.