

(Article from the "New York Lawyer" publication – July, 2000 issue)

Center for Executive Education: Where Innovators Learn To Do More than Hup-To

The Navy isn't known for valuing initiative. You get orders, you follow them. You do what your senior officer tells you to do, and you do it the way he tells you to do it. You make no changes, suggest no alternatives - even though you may perceive an easier or more effective way to fulfill your orders. It's called the chain of command, and it's a rock-solid tradition – not unlike the traditions at many law firms.

Barry Frew, founder of the Center for Executive Education at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, grew up in the Navy (he upped in 1968), is devoted to it, and, as a former senior officer, would have benefited from being near the top of the chain of command. Yet Frew saw that the Navy way was getting in the way. Getting in the way of taking the Navy where it needed to be to sustain itself, to be, as Frew puts it, "the employer of choice, not the employer of last resort."

As a graduate-level teacher, Frew saw his students, year after year, enter the hierarchy full of new ideas that had no hope of getting implemented because senior officers were unaccustomed, to say the least, to hearing lower officers suggest how their superiors might improve things.

So Frew set out to change the way the Navy operates – specifically, to encourage the organization to be more receptive to new ideas. He continued to teach graduate-level computer and technology courses, but he also created a "class for brass" through which top-ranking officials received the same cutting-edge info as the graduate students. He spread the wealth.

Next on Frew's agenda was sharing it. While higher and lower ranking officers now had the same information, barriers to exchanging it still existed. So Frew created a forum where middle-ranking officers learned to address their ideas and suggestions to senior officers, and senior officers learned to listen and consider them. Then Frew went a giant step farther. He created a class in which mid-level officers would critique the military service and then would present their findings to the Undersecretary of the Navy.

"The goal of the Center is to help the Navy make the transition from industrial-age thinking to information-age thinking through change implemented by individuals," shrugs Frew. "So I, an individual, implemented change."

"So what I'm most proud of," Frew continues, "is that we're modifying the dialogue at all levels within the Navy. You can hear the words that started in our room making it throughout the organization. You can hear a tolerance for ideas that's growing."

At first, of course, all Frew could hear was resistance. He says that the faculty felt that the course lacked educational rigor; the comptrollers didn't want to provide funds for carpeting, couches, and art (to think differently, you should be in a place that looks different, Frew's thinking goes) when the rest of the school makes do with

basic prison issue furniture that's bolted to the floor; and the legal department, who just plain objected.

"The message was, "We don't care if you do innovative things, so long as you do them within the existing structure or, at the very least, try to make them look traditional," says Frew. "All I heard was, "you can't buy this, you can't use that, you can't, you can't, you can't."

But, in fact, Frew did. He persisted for two years with little help. Then a three-star admiral at the Pentagon got wind of his ideas and gave him the go-ahead. The Center officially opened in October of 1998, five years after Frew initially began challenging the Navy's status quo.

"Anger got me through it," Frew laughs. "But, honestly," he says, "I think I was driven a higher calling-by my love for the Navy and my conviction that graduate education at the senior level is strategically necessary for it. I felt in my heart that the Navy needed this shot in the arm to sustain itself. And that was what drove me the whole time."

(Martha Visser is a freelance writer specializing in business and travel in New York. Her work appears regularly in Fortune Small Business, Fortune magazine's online arm.)