



**RE-CHARTING THE NEXT COURSE:
NAVIGATING THE NAVAL TECHNICAL OFFICER DEVELOPMENT
CHALLENGE THROUGH MENTORSHIP**

Lieutenant-Commander Hubert Tong

JCSP 50

Service Paper

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THROUGH MENTORSHIP**

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RE-CHARTING THE NEXT COURSE: NAVIGATING NAVAL TECHNICAL OFFICER DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE THROUGH MENTORSHIP

AIM

1. The aim of this service paper is to advocate for the creation of a Naval Technical Officer (NTO) mentorship registry within the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). This mentorship initiative would be modeled after the successful, and ongoing, mentorship programs implemented by professional engineering associations across Canada's provinces. This initiative aims to address the challenge of the limited operational experience faced by many NTOs in their career progression and professional development, primarily due to a lack of opportunities to deploy aboard warships. A mentorship initiative can mitigate against this challenge by nurturing technically and operationally proficient NTOs, essential for strengthening the RCN's core capability of sustaining the Operation and Maintenance (O&M) of the current fleet and effectively conducting procurement activities for future fleet development. Drawing upon the Indigenous Leadership framework and contemporary examples of mentorship, this paper seeks to demonstrate the efficacy of mentorship initiatives and their potential benefit on the RCN's operational readiness.

INTRODUCTION

2. Mentorship plays a crucial role in the enrichment of individual members and the institutional development of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), fostering growth and collaboration while integrating new members into the CAF culture. However, formalized mentorship programs frequently lacked sustainment in the NTO community, leading to sporadic attention and efforts. This service paper explores the efficacy of mentorships through the lens of the Indigenous Leadership framework, examining historical and contemporary examples in both military and non-military contexts. The synthesis of these case studies, supported with theoretical perspectives, provides a strong case for the creation of a Naval Technical Officer (NTO) mentorship registry within the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). This initiative aims to address the challenges faced by NTOs in their career progression and professional development, strengthening the RCN's operational capability and their readiness for future challenges.

DISCUSSION

3. The Indigenous Leadership Framework offers a profound perspective on leadership, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of leadership roles within a community or organization.¹ The key insight to this framework is the recognition that leadership is not confined to formal positions of authority; leadership extends to individuals who assume various roles based on their skills, knowledge, and relationships within the community or organization.² Leadership is exercised as a means to reaching consensus in decision making in many indigenous

¹ Julien, Mark, Barry Wright, and Deborah M. Zinni. "Stories from the Circle: Leadership Lessons Learned from Aboriginal Leaders." *The Leadership Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2010): 114-126.

² Edwards, Gareth. "Anthropological accounts of leadership: Historical and geographical interpretations from indigenous cultures." *Leadership* 11, no. 3 (2015): 335-350.

communities, with a deliberate emphasis on avoiding coercion.³ Within this context, mentorship emerges as a distinct leadership role, characterized by a personal commitment to assisting others in their journey towards success.⁴

4. A mentorship has at least two participants: a mentor and a mentee. The mentor is a person who has a mix of skills, knowledge and experience, they teach or assist and advise a less experienced, and often younger person, the mentee.⁵ A mentor can choose to assist multiple mentees, and likewise, an individual mentee can have several mentors. A mentorship general has two distinct functions; a career function, and a psychosocial function.⁶ The career function provides the mentee access to information, enabling exposure and awareness to the organization, and can (but not always) include elements of teaching, coaching, as well as advocacy for the mentee. The psychosocial function provides the mentee a safe space centered on trust and confidentiality, for advice, encouragement, support, role-modeling. A strong and enduring mentorship can evolve into friendship when it is sustained over a long period of time.⁷

5. An effective mentorship is a deeply personal commitment grounded in dedication and loyalty to one's comrades or community members.⁸ Unlike the authorities invested in a Commanding Officer, whose leadership is defined by hierarchical power and formal responsibilities, a mentor operates from a place of voluntary engagement and genuine desire to support and guide others. While a Commanding Officer may provide direction and enforce orders within a structured chain of command, a mentor offers guidance and advice based on personal experiences, insights, and understanding.

6. Mentorship is distinct from the mandates of a coach or instructor; who focus on teaching specific skillsets or knowledge. Mentors offer a broader spectrum of support that encompasses not only professional development, but also personal growth and holistic well-being. Mentors invest their time and effort in nurturing meaningful relationships with their mentees. Such a relationship can, over time, become a safe space for the mentee, an environment of trust, respect, and collaboration.

7. Likewise, the empathy and compassion required to be effective in a human resource role differ from the dynamics of mentorship. While HR professionals facilitate organizational processes to address personnel-related issues, mentors engage on a more personal level, offering emotional support, encouragement, and guidance tailored to the individual needs of their mentees. Whereas human resource management is integrated into the hierarchy of an institution such as the CAF and the RCN, mentorship thrives on informal interactions and mutual respect, transcending bureaucratic constraints and organizational boundaries.

³ Gram-Hanssen, Irmelin. "Individual and collective leadership for deliberate transformations: Insights from Indigenous Leadership." *Leadership* 17, no. 5, 5 October 2021 (519-541)

⁴ Harrison, Michael. "True Mentorship is Never Scripted." *United States Naval Institute. Proceedings* 130, no. 2 (2004): 62.

⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mentor> - accessed 16 September 2023

⁶ Baker, Brett T., Susan P. Hovevar, and W. Brad Johnson. "The Prevalence and Nature of Service Academy Mentoring: A Study of Navy Midshipmen." *Military Psychology* 15, no. 4 (2003): 273-283.

⁷ Johnson, W. Brad and Gene R. Andersen. "Formal Mentoring in The U.S. Military: Research Evidence, Lingering Questions, and Recommendations." *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 2 (2010): 113-126.

⁸ Harrison, Michael.

8. Mentorship within the Indigenous Leadership Framework represents a unique form of leadership. It is characterized by its voluntary nature, personal commitment, and holistic approach to supporting others. Along with other facets of leadership, mentorship forms an essential part of the reciprocity, community, and interconnectedness inherent in many Indigenous cultures, emphasizing the importance of relational dynamics and mutual support in achieving collective success.⁹ By recognizing mentorship as a distinct leadership role, separate from traditional hierarchies and formal mandates, organizations such as the CAF and the RCN can harness its transformative potential to enable individual and collective growth.

9. During World War One, the Canadian Corps showcased a remarkable example of mentorship through their interactions with their British counterparts in the lead-up to the Battle of Vimy Ridge.¹⁰ The initially inexperienced Canadians established a rapport with their British Imperial counterparts, laying the groundwork for a collaborative relationship based on mutual respect and shared objectives. Aside from the Corps' organizational structure, leadership roles were not actively sought, leaders were identified based on their skill, knowledge and experience, to which others deferred in order to learn from their expertise. Different individuals in the Corps and amongst their British counterparts took on and relinquished leadership at various times as they collaborated and achieved consensus in refining battlefield tactics and procedures. One such battlefield example is the creeping barrage artillery technique, although it was perfected by the Canadian, it was actually pioneered by the French in earlier battles of World War One.

10. When reflecting on the historic use case of mentorship in the Canadian Corps of 1918, note there was no institutional mentoring program within the Corps, and there was no empirical evidence, such as activity logs, meeting minutes, or registries indicating mentoring was mandated. Much of the mentorship narrative is pieced together through collating individual testimonies with officer assignments, and in turn referencing these to the tactics that were refined.¹¹

11. This leads to two insights that are still relevant in contemporary times concerning mentorship, as it were back in 1918. Firstly, true mentorship can rarely be scripted¹², which aligns with the Indigenous framework where leadership is based on care, not coercion. A respectful and collaborative rapport is rarely established instantly; one must be immersed in the organization's culture and the skill, knowledge and experience of others in the organization must be recognized. Once established, a deliberate commitment to sustain the mentorship is critical.

12. Secondly, an effective and enduring mentorship requires trust and confidentiality. The lack of data is not necessarily indicative that no mentoring is occurring in the organization, but a wealth of data also does not vouch for the efficacy a mandated mentoring initiative. This ambiguity exists due to the difficulty of obtaining clear awareness of how many mentorships are ongoing, especially the enduring ones that have been established and sustained for a long time,

⁹ Gram-Hanssen, Irmelin. "Individual and collective leadership for deliberate transformations: Insights from Indigenous Leadership." *Leadership* 17, no.5, 5 October 2021 (519-541)

¹⁰ Delaney, Douglas E. "Mentoring the Canadian Corps: Imperial Officers and the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918." *The Journal of Military History* 77, no. 3 (2013): 931.

¹¹ Delaney, Douglas E. "Mentoring the Canadian Corps: Imperial Officers and the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918." *The Journal of Military History* 77, no. 3 (2013): 953.

¹² Harrison, Michael. "True Mentorship is Never Scripted." *United States Naval Institute. Proceedings* 130, no. 2 (2004): 62.

the ones that transcend rank differences, through multiple posting cycles, across different trades/occupations, or other organization boundaries. Many mentorships are not casually/openly disclosed.

13. Mentorship is heavily leveraged in the engineering profession throughout Canada, and can equally be examined in relation to the Indigenous Leadership framework. Across all provincial jurisdictions in Canada, each Professional Engineer (P.Eng) accreditation is predicated on mentorship, it is a key developmental foundation during an Engineer-In-Training (EIT)'s four year internship.^{13 14 15} Engineering Mentors are volunteers who anonymously signal their willingness to invest their personal time and efforts to assist new aspiring degreed Engineers. These junior members also signal their desire for mentorship through registration as an EIT. The engineering association does not enforce any mandates when matching mentors to EITs, which aligns with the Indigenous framework focusing on care, not coercion. When a successful pairing occurs, it is sustained through mutual trust, respect, and confidentiality between the two parties. The volunteer is committing to taking on an additional leadership role; a role that is distinct and external of their regular professional employment obligations and employer organizational hierarchy, to assist a younger, less experienced person in their career development, who is often in a completely different and unrelated organization. The volunteer mentor has no authority over the EIT's employer or employment organization; the mentorship dynamic thus transcends organizational boundaries.

14. An NTO mentor sharing their experiences with their mentees via stories of wild adventures during port visits and tales of poor judgement on a particular technical issue while on deployment is akin to the storytelling inherent in many Indigenous communities to pass on knowledge and experience, such as the Navaho.¹⁶ The mentor, as a leader, has a formal role in within the RCN, but they also chose to take on an additional different role when teaching and advising a junior member who does not hold a formal role within the mentor's unit. The career function of the mentor enables the mentee to learn and understand the organization's culture, while also enabling the mentee to integrate into the organization across multiple lines (rather than the mentee being restricted to a formal hierarchy exclusively). Last but not least, the mentor's role-modeling, support, and sharing lessons learned also imparts insights into the organization's processes to the mentee.¹⁷

15. Within this inter-personnel dynamic, an effective mentorship can provide mitigation against limited operational experience faced by many NTOs in their career progression and professional development, primarily due to a lack of opportunities to deploy aboard warships. Mentorship as a stand-alone topic is not new per se, these dynamics and interdependences are absent in previous traditional leadership frameworks, where the focus was largely centered on the leader in a singular all-encompassing role; such as the popular narrative suggesting Sir Arthur

¹³ Engineers Nova Scotia – Mentor Program. <https://www.engineersnovascotia.ca/mentor-program/>. Accessed 2 October 2023.

¹⁴ Professional Engineers Ontario – Apply to be a Volunteer. <https://www.peo.on.ca/volunteers/apply-be-volunteer/>. Accessed 2 October 2023.

¹⁵ Engineers and Geoscientists British Columbia – Mentoring Program. <https://www.egbc.ca/Registration/Programs-Resources/Mentoring-Program/>. Accessed 2 October 2023.

¹⁶ Edwards, Gareth. "Anthropological accounts of leadership: Historical and geographical interpretations from indigenous cultures." *Leadership 11*, no. 3 (2015): 335–350.

¹⁷ Gram-Hanssen, Irmelin. "Individual and collective leadership for deliberate transformations: Insights from Indigenous Leadership." *Leadership 17*, no.5, 5 October 2021 (519-541)

Currie single-handedly led the Canadian Corps and largely ignoring the enabling role that mentoring played in the Corps. While there are overlaps, these previous theories do not provide sufficient examination of how mentoring is functionally different from other leadership roles.¹⁸ This does not render the previous theories obsolete, but the gaps are indicative that the Indigenous framework is a better fit towards understanding the role and efficacy that mentoring can achieve, and understanding how it is its own distinct role in leadership.¹⁹

16. In synthesizing these insights, one can clearly observe that successful mentorships can contribute positively to a member's professional development, career advancement, as well as their loyalty, dedication, and desire to continue to serve in the military. Despite there being no sources documenting mentorship failures in the CAF, there are challenges inherent to employing mentoring techniques/strategies effectively in the CAF, some of these challenges are admittedly rarely present or are completely absent in a non-military context.

17. Reflecting on one's experiences in the CAF versus one's experiences external of the CAF, it has frequently been observed that mentoring initiatives lack sustainment due to many reasons. Well-intentioned mentors have no training on how to be effective mentors, as a result they often misunderstand boundaries (refrain from using coercion!) and have mismanaged expectations. Mentorship initiatives are championed during a specific posting cycle, while initial success may have been achieved, the initiatives are not sustained at the next posting cycle. An initial mentorship rapport may have been established between the mentee and a potential mentor, but either or both parties lose contact with each other due to postings. The mentor's immediate superior is posted, and the new superior dictates a change in priorities, forcing the mentor to de-prioritize their oversight over a mentorship initiative. The previously established division of labour is disrupted at the next posting cycle, forcing a de-prioritization of the mentorship initiative to cover for positions and billets being left vacant. Many leaders feel pressured to participate as mentors in every mentorship initiative, lest they be seen as unmotivated and undedicated. Many mentees sign up without understanding what mentorship is, in large part due to the word being frequently overused in the wrong context, and then they are subsequently disappointed.

CONCLUSION

18. This service paper advocates for the establishment of a NTO mentorship registry within the RCN, inspired by the Indigenous Leadership Framework, supported by historical and contemporary examples of effective mentorship. The examples discussed include the personal and organization growth through mentorship exhibited by the Canadian Corps in World War One, and the successful ongoing mentorships programs implemented by professional engineering associations across Canada's provinces. Insights and previous experiences were also shared concerning previous mentorship initiatives in the CAF.

19. Mentorship is a distinct leadership role, separate from traditional hierarchies and formal mandates. The RCN can leverage this to address the challenges faced by NTOs lacking operational experiences in their career progression and professional development. Mentorship

¹⁸ Okros, Alan. Leadership Theories and Frameworks. DS555-50/LDR/LE-3. 06-Sep-2023.

¹⁹ Gram-Hanssen, Irmelin. "Individual and collective leadership for deliberate transformations: Insights from Indigenous Leadership." *Leadership* 17, no.5, 5 October 2021 (521)

can mitigate against this challenge by nurturing technically and operationally proficient NTOs, which is essential for the RCN's core capability of sustaining the O&M of the current fleet and effectively conducting procurement activities for future fleet.

RECOMMENDATION

20. Any mentorship initiative implemented must recognize the voluntary nature, personal commitment and non-coercive dynamic of a mentorship. The initiative must also recognize enduring mentorship requires trust and confidentiality. Many existing mentorships are not casually/openly disclosed.

21. It is recommended that the proposed NTO mentorship registry within the RCN incorporates key elements highlighted in the following:

a. **Training:** Implement training for mentors to ensure they have the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively support their mentees. This training should cover areas such as active listening, providing constructive feedback, fostering a safe space for professional growth, with an emphasis on empowering the mentee to make informed decisions, and refraining from coercing the mentee to make a specific decision.

b. **Sustainability:** Establishing clear guidelines and expectations for mentors and mentees, and employ discreet mechanisms for ongoing support and evaluation, such as anonymous surveys and informal check-ins. Avoid using overt means of data collection in order to maintain the voluntary nature of the initiative and preserve participants' trust and confidentiality.

c. **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Recognize the diverse needs and preferences of NTOs and mentors by offering flexibility in matching pairs based on individual goals, interests, and career trajectories. Allow for adjustments to the mentorship arrangements to accommodate changing circumstances and evolving professional development needs.

d. **Integration:** Integrate the NTO mentorship registry with existing career development and advancement initiatives within the RCN, such as the RCN's Non-Commissioned Officers Mentorship Program²⁰, and the Assistant Deputy Minister (Materiel) mentoring initiative, aimed primarily at Public Servants and focused on Diversity and Inclusivity.²¹ This can create a cohesive and comprehensive support system for NTOs, aligning mentorship goals with career progression pathways and leveraging existing resources and networks towards the overall effectiveness of the program.

e. **Consultation:** Establish a rapport with the professional engineering associations in order to learn more about their existing mentorship programs, as well as enable lessons learned and knowledge transfer as inputs towards the design and implementation of the NTO mentorship registry.

²⁰ Email comms with CPO1 Matthew Boniface, 29 January 2024.

²¹ Email comms with Mr Dave Tremblay, 25 January 2024.

22. These recommendations on the implementation of the NTO mentorship registry can enable the RCN to establish a robust and sustainable mentorship program, that effectively addresses the personal and professional needs of its NTOs, ultimately enhancing operational readiness and capability within the organization. This is essential for sustaining the O&M of the current fleet and effectively conducting procurement activities for future fleet development.

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Drafting this paper reminded me of a passage from a beautiful book, *Big Panda and a Tiny Dragon* (2021) by James Norbury, chronicling a thought-provoking journey of companionship, courage, tenderness, and delicious tea.



Reading this passage always makes me smile. It reminds me of all the shipmates, colleagues and friends that have since retired or released from the Canadian Armed Forces. I owe much of who I am today to their kindness, forgiveness, and yes, their mentorship. I miss their companionship very much. My thanks to all of them for their service to their country, and also for their company. My own journey would not be as good without having met and known them all. I hope to have opportunities in the future to reconnect with them.

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