NAVSEA Leadership: High-Velocity Learning Key to Expanding the Advantage

WASHINGTON – The two top leaders of Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA) bookended the first high-velocity learning (HVL) summit to show their commitment to HVL, one of the pillars of the NAVSEA Campaign Plan to Expand the Advantage, the Naval Surface Warfare Center's Carderock Division said in a May 17 release.

Jim Smerchansky, executive director for NAVSEA, opened the HVL summit held at Naval Surface Warfare Center (NSWC), Carderock Division in West Bethesda, Maryland, May 15-16. NAVSEA Commander Vice Adm. Thomas Moore closed the event, which brought representatives of NAVSEA commands together to discuss HVL tools, successes and opportunities.

With similar messages about the importance of high-velocity learning, both men described the need to increase the United States' capabilities over its adversaries. The country is in an era of great power competition, namely with Russia and China, and according to both Smerchansky and Moore, NAVSEA's vision to "expand the advantage" means contributing to the overall effort of the secretary of defense's National Defense Strategy to broaden that capability gap.

"High-velocity learning is about mission accomplishment," Smerchansky said. "Our obligation, our mission to the Navy and the nation is to deliver and provide warfighting systems and ships to the men and women of the country to never allow them to be in a fair fight. Our obligation to our workforce is to provide meaningful work and the right tools they need to be successful."

Each of the speakers took questions from the audience, many of

which were concerning the loss of knowledge that is expected as the more experienced employees retire.

In response to one such question, Smerchansky said instead of thinking of it as a transfer of knowledge to the next generation, people should consider a transfer of experience, meaning the more senior employees need to start turning their work over to the junior employees, allowing them to gain the experience necessary to work through problems.

“High-velocity learning can go right to the heart of that,” Smerchansky said. “This is the generation coming up that has to be able to look right; they have to count on the 75,000 people (within NAVSEA) to be part of their network to help them be successful.”

The idea of high-velocity learning originated from the book, “The High-Velocity Edge,” by Steven Spear. Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson adopted HVL as something every level of the organization should be achieving, as laid out in his plan “A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority.”

High-velocity learning can be explained with the four “S’s:” see, swarm/solve, share and sustain. Within this framework, decision making can be pushed to the lowest levels of the organizations, thereby empowering employees to gain the experience Smerchansky said they need.

During the summit, which included remarks by Rear Adm. Doug Small, Program Executive Office, Integrated Warfare Systems, the attendees were able to experience their own “swarm.” NAVSEA’s PMS 391 (Team Subs) identified three challenges they have, specifically in modernization, acquisition and maintenance.

“We use these philosophies in hopes of becoming a true learning organization,” said Jana Patterson, a senior acquisition product engineer for Team Subs. “We are trying to figure out how to not only increase the throughput of

modernization, but to improve upon our maintenance situation, the processes already in place."

Patterson said the knowledge is at the waterfront with the people actually turning wrenches or ordering parts, and the people in service support, like her, need to hear from them.

"We are looking for ideas on how to empower that level of personnel out at the shipyards, whether they be private or government, to identify issues," Patterson said.

The attendees split into three groups and spent about 45 minutes brainstorming the issues presented by Team Subs, working towards possible solutions, which is precisely what "swarming" is. They then came back together to share their results. Even though most of the people in the groups did not work in the submarine world, it was their own experiences that led to the possible solutions.

Patterson came away with several ideas, which she said she will take back to her work environment and see if there are opportunities to incorporate some of the possible solutions.

The idea of HVL is not only improving processes by seeing the problems and swarming them for solutions, but it's also about sharing across the enterprise so the workforce is working smarter and continuing to expand the advantage.

"If you can't spend a little bit of time doing strategic planning, high-velocity planning on what the future workforce needs to look like, then we are kind of doomed to do what we've been doing over and over again," said Don McCormack, executive director for NSWC and Naval Undersea Warfare Center.

One of the common themes at the summit was communication as a barrier to high-velocity learning.

"The biggest challenge I have every day is effectively communicating to a workforce of 75,000 people," Moore said,

acknowledging that sharing is going to naturally be the hardest part about HVL. “But if we really want to be a high-velocity learning organization, we have to be able to communicate and get it down to where it’s culturally important for us to be working on this; it has to become second nature.”

Moore said he expects the attendees of the HVL summit to become the change agents, relying on them to force the culture to change.

“The two things on the Campaign Plan that require the most work and that we’ve made the least amount of progress on, they are both ideas that are culture issues, a culture of high-velocity learning and a culture of affordability,” Moore said. “Why are those things the hardest? Because culture in an organization is the absolute hardest thing to change, without a doubt.”

Moore challenged the summit attendees to take the principles of high-velocity learning to the next level and find a way to get them ingrained into the culture, so that everybody is thinking about HVL.

“The high-velocity learning piece is probably the most key element to eventually getting to the vision to expanding the advantage,” Moore said.