

## **MENTOR SPOTLIGHT - MR. SONNY FANN**

Naval Air Systems Command  
Mentoring-Externally Directed Team

Tell us a bit about yourself and professional journey

I work for AIR-6.0 as the “C” Code but am currently temporarily assigned to the NAVAIR Total Force Strategy and Management Department assisting with the NAVAIR Individuals With Disabilities (IWD) and Wounded Warrior programs. I first came to NAVAIR in October 1987 as an active duty Marine major to be the AH-1W/UH-1N assistant program manager for logistics. After a final tour on the CNO Air Warfare Staff (OP59), where I served as the director for Enlisted Aviation Technical Training, I subsequently retired in October 1992. I supported NAVAIR programs as a contractor until I was hired as a civil servant in 1996. Since that time, I have been blessed with great leaders who have given me many opportunities to grow and have had the privilege to work with and lead many outstanding NAVAIR employees.

My favorite and most rewarding assignment was as a competency manager in NAWCAD 6.0, where I was responsible for many logistics career field professionals. My boss at that time, John Altomare, was a leader, mentor and friend who personally and professionally impacted my career. He allowed me to do my job and fulfill the number one priority: taking care of people and developing them to achieve their career aspirations. In my current assignment, I work with a group of military and civilian leaders and professionals to provide placement opportunities and HOPE for our returning Wounded Warrior HEROES and an often overlooked IWD candidate pool. NAVAIR is committed to providing placement and developmental opportunities for these people, and it is an honor to be a part of something so important. I really have to thank my boss, Garry Newton, Gary Kurtz, Cindy Worcester and all my team members for allowing me to participate in this most important endeavor.

Have you ever had a mentor?

I can name a few people in my military and civil service career who have made an absolute difference in my personal and professional life. The most recent is my former boss in AIR-6.0, Kalmen “Kal” Leikach. He is a kind gentleman who truly believes in the value of people by allowing them to try new things and sometimes even fail. However, I always believed he would rather have people take a risk and possibly fail, than not try at all. He has high expectations of his people, especially those in leadership positions, and he

made everyone feel important and valued. The respect he showed everyone and his outward positive demeanor is mentoring by example. He taught me, and others, that leadership is an honor and privilege, and people are the most important asset. We have many talented and professional leaders at all levels in NAVAIR who truly care about people. However, I believe it is so easy to get so focused on the business that we forget to pay enough attention to the most important asset we have: our people! I have always believed any success I may have in my career is off the backs of the great people who have supported me.

I believe coaching and mentoring our workforce is the most fundamental leadership responsibility we have. All the organizational charts, mission statements, strategic plans, etc., don't mean anything if we don't have a highly motivated, well trained and committed workforce to accomplish the mission and tasks. I believe we can mentor through our actions, through formal programs and can achieve the best results by mentoring in informal settings. Regardless of the type of mentoring opportunity, it shows our people they are valued and their career aspirations and well-being are our first priority as leaders and managers. Mentoring in any form is vital to recruiting, retaining and developing a workforce to meet our 21<sup>st</sup> century needs.

Peer-to-peer mentoring is extremely effective in positively impacting our workforce to resolve problems or concerns they might be uncomfortable presenting to their boss. My last point is that sometimes the people we mentor are actually mentoring us, if we are willing to pay attention to them. I've learned a lot from subordinates about what makes a good leader and what motivates them to follow you. It is hard to lead if you have people unwilling to follow you!

What traits define a good mentor?

A good mentor certainly has to have the personal and professional credibility within a chosen career field. However, the most important characteristics are commitment, honesty and a genuine caring about people and their success. I encourage people to have many mentors, both formal and informal, and to seek out mentors at all levels within NAVAIR. The benefit about having a variety of mentors is that it can give the mentee total perspective of the opportunities or solutions at hand.

What expectations do you have from a mentee?

I think this question is more relevant in a formal mentoring session. I try to mentor people whenever they seek me out. This should be considered an honor since the mentee obviously thinks highly of you to make this request. In my case, I'm pretty straight with the mentees. This is a trusted relationship, and we have to be honest with each other. Mentees should not just look for the advice that suits their perspective, but be open to advice that differs from their ideas. If we all thought alike, we would not need mentors.

What is your most gratifying experience as a mentor?

I cannot point to a specific example, because there have been many. However, I remember in the NAWCAD 6.0 Competency, I had an outstanding and technically proficient employee who seemed to have difficulty advancing to the next level, despite his abilities. I personally worked with this individual by encouraging him to continue his education and demonstrate his value to his bosses. He also was extremely afraid of interviewing for a position. He did the things I recommended and I sent him on many interviews to get the experience. The most gratifying memory for me is when he walked into my office, all smiles, because he got the job. He had everything in him to advance; he just needed someone to believe in him. In my present position, I have a chance to meet our Wounded Warrior HEROES who have no idea what the future has in store for them and their families. I mentor these people by drawing out their experiences and indicate how these skill sets can provide them an opportunity for a NAVAIR career. Their eyes go from sadness and despair, to shining and hopeful. When we can place one of these deserving HEROES, that's priceless!!

Why did you become a mentor?

I became a mentor, starting in the Marine Corps, because I truly believe the diversity that exists in our workforce is our greatest strength and our people are our most important national treasures. I believe it is everyone's responsibility, seniors and peers, to make the commitment to our subordinates to demonstrate how we value them in our organization. When I read the citations of Wounded Warrior HEROES and understand the heroic actions they took, I'm completely in awe. That 20-year-old sailor, Marine, soldier and airman is not much different than your average workmate. It is the situation that turned that person into a hero, and our workforce would probably demonstrate the same heroic actions given the right circumstances.

I think we sometimes make false assumptions about the true capabilities of our workforce because of our own inaccurate paradigms. In short, I mentor because that is what I think our workforce expects of us!

Take a minute to consider the professional benefits of mentoring. To learn more about NAVAIR'S Mentoring Program, visit <https://mentoring.navair.navy.mil> or contact Donna Belcher (NAVAIR'S Mentoring Program Manager) at 301.342.5096. If you have a personal mentoring success story to share, contact Veronica Miskowski at 301.757.8391 or Lonnie Snead at 301.757.8252. We'd love to hear from you.