

Parking Spaces, the Navy, and Scarcity Mentality

I had the privilege of taking part in a John Maxwell Team Conference in August of 2017. During the event, John Maxwell told a story about finding a parking spot. The story had little to do with parking spots, but a great deal to do with attitude and mentality.

John told us of an occasion when he took his family to an afternoon parade downtown. His adult children recommended they take a shuttle bus because the traffic was certain to be terrible and all the parking spots would be taken. John dismissed their concerns and informed them that he had no intention of taking a shuttle; they would drive to the parade and they would find a parking spot. Everyone expressed their doubts but piled into the car, and off they went. Sure enough, when they were about five blocks away from the parade route they saw an open parking spot. But to the amazement of his family, John drove right past it. His family asked him “Didn’t you see that spot? Why didn’t you take it?” The family was in disbelief, but John drove onward towards the parade route.

As he continued, his passengers began to lament not taking the shuttle bus and having to walk a long way in the heat of the day just to see the parade. John wouldn’t have any of it—he forged on. Then, less than a block from the parade route, a car began backing out of a prime parking spot. Bingo! John had just saved the family a five-block forced march while arriving at their destination in the comfort of their own vehicle. His family rejoiced at their luck and they quickly forgot their prior admonitions. Was it good fortune that delivered the prime parking spot or was it John’s attitude and desire to break with conventional wisdom for the potential of a greater payout?

The average person would have been put off by the potential risk of lack of parking and opted to take the shuttle bus for an end result that was nearly guaranteed. The average person would have arrived at the shuttle queue early, waited patiently for its arrival, subjected themselves to an overcrowded bus, and would accept being dropped off a few blocks from the parade route to commence the final approach on foot. At the parade’s conclusion, the average person would join the long lines of grumpy people waiting for the shuttle bus to arrive, and when it did, they would dutifully cram themselves into its warm and sticky interior and slowly make their way back to their destination.

Many of us, perhaps most of us, have been programmed to think this way—to take the path that presents the least amount of risk. We assume there is wisdom in the crowd, and we are often encouraged to go after the sure thing, vice taking a chance on an option that offers the potential for greater reward. John’s approach to finding the parking spot was really about his determination and willingness to accept an evaluated risk for the possibility of a better outcome. He had no intention of being average. Why would anyone settle for being average? What

separated John and his family was their mentality. His family had fallen into a scarcity mentality; John, on the other hand, considered the situation with an abundance mentality.

As I listened to his story, it reminded me of a meeting I had the prior year with some Navy colleagues. We were trying to resolve a training problem regarding a new technology. As I listened to the young officers and chief petty officers brainstorm, I kept hearing them say things like, “We can’t do that. It will cost too much money,” or “It would take too many people” in response to training approaches which required additional resources. They had fallen victim to a scarcity mentality. Perhaps unwittingly, but the scarcity mentality was so powerful they were preemptively going to deprive their bosses of some of their best ideas. They confined their creative thinking to a box—a box not imposed on them by leadership, but by the scarcity mentality. For roughly 50 years we have been told to think outside the box, perhaps now cliché, but there is wisdom in this philosophy.

This type of thinking is prevalent because operational forces constantly are bombarded with the message that the Navy doesn’t have the resources to train or equip them differently or better. The Navy, up and down the chain of command, knowingly or unknowingly, has programmed their best incubators of great ideas to think in terms of scarcity and not in terms of what can be.

Christopher Hawker, in a 1 December 2015 entrepreneur.com article about this subject, said, “The scarcity-based leader accepts things for how they currently are instead of second-guessing for how they could be, and they resign themselves to existing limitation . . . Scarcity-based leaders and organizations find themselves locked into false choices and zero-sum propositions rather than expansive possibilities.”

It’s easy to fall into the scarcity mentality and it requires constant vigilance to prevent slipping into it. This is particularly true in rigid bureaucracies or in a hierarchal organization like the Navy. I have been on the manning, training, and equipping (MTE) side of this equation while stationed at Navy headquarters (OPNAV), and as I think back on that experience, I realize that I frequently operated with a scarcity mentality even though I had “requirements” in my job title.

As a quick example of how scarcity thinking can develop and can be promoted, let me describe what often happened at OPNAV. In 2004, we were amid a counterinsurgency war in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and improvised explosive devices (IED) were the insurgents’ weapon of choice. OPNAV successfully lobbied the Department of Defense (DoD) to reprogram \$120 million to support the EOD community’s counter improvised explosive device (IED) requirements. It was a big win for the EOD community and would help save lives. Almost

immediately, however, we found ourselves defending against Navy elements that had competing requirements. DoD and the Navy were signaling that there was not enough money, and the operational commanders fighting the war were constantly asking for more, often a lot more. With these two dynamics, it is easy to see how scarcity thinking can develop.

OPNAV is where MTE decisions are made. Hopefully, when they decide to take risk in one area over another, it is done consciously and those decisions are borne from good information provided by the lower echelons[1]. Again, what happens if the lower echelons are operating with a scarcity mentality? If we, the seniors in the chain of command, are operating from the scarcity mentality as well, how many opportunities for a better outcome, or even a more affordable outcome, are we leaving unexplored? Worse, how many are never presented to leadership for thoughtful consideration? This message is echoed and amplified by the chain of command and eventually manifests itself in a meeting between people trying to figure out a solution to a training problem. I wonder how many times a great solution was crushed in its infancy due to the relentless message of scarcity promoted by our leadership and a culture that has embraced the scarcity mentality? The “higher ups” in the Navy need to be aware of the signals they are sending and need to actively promote the abundance mentality, because the alternative stifles innovation and visionary thinking.

The operational Navy should think in terms of requirements, not money. It is not the operational Navy’s problem. It is the problem of those charged with making the MTE decisions. It’s the job of the MTE command to knowingly take risk in one area over another because there is not enough money to do it everything. Promoting requirements from an abundance mentality will arm the MTE organizations in higher echelons with the data they need to advocate for the resources that are needed to fill capability gaps, not “false choices and zero-sum propositions.” It is not about the cost of the solution, it is about the potential reward.

It is not the job of a commanding officer of an echelon IV or V organization to say “no” to his or her people because the budget will not support their requests. It is his or her job to say yes, but also to ask why and how? If the solution is sound, he or she must be willing to take the concept forward to those charged with making MTE decisions and give them the courtesy of seeing all the options before making that resourcing decision. If you or the people that work for you are making decisions on your perceived affordability for a solution, I urge you to think differently and try to get everyone under your charge to begin thinking with an abundance mentality.

Is the scarcity mentality part of the reason for our recent tragedies in the Navy? Yes, it is. Scarcity thinking is prevalent across the Navy from chief petty officer to admiral and is partly to blame for some of the readiness problems we have been

facing, and we would benefit from analyzing this phenomenon thoroughly.

The next time you are faced with a real solution that requires resources, whether it be financial or more manpower or just additional labor hours, think about what could be and not what is. Changing your mentality will change your reality. Avoid the crowds, and stay off the risk-adverse shuttle bus.

Endnote

[1] Echelon is a level of command, authority or rank. In the Navy, OPNAV is echelon one, Fleet Forces Command is echelon two, Navy Expeditionary Combat Command is echelon three, and EOD Group One/Two are echelon four. The EOD community's operational forces are generally at echelon four and five.