Why Good People Leave Good Organizations

Jim Petersen, PhD · August 8, 2026

The Leadership Cost of Unnecessary Friction

A PETERSEN LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY PAPER

> *"The concern is losing someone because of friction that contributes nothing to the mission and was within our power to remove."*

Most retention advice begins by adding something. More money. More recognition. Another program, another benefit, another team-building event. The list is long, and much of it is useful. But if you have watched a talented person leave an organization they still respected, doing work they still found meaningful, under a leader they may even have liked, you may already suspect the problem: sometimes the organization did not fail to add enough. It failed to remove something.

This paper is about that something.

The starting point is not mine. On August 8, 2026, Commander Jordan Kelly, then serving as Deputy Commander of Submarine Squadron Fifteen and preparing for submarine command, published a short essay titled "Why Good Officers Leave Good Jobs." He was wrestling with a problem the submarine force has confronted for decades: talented officers who have meaningful reasons to stay and decide to leave anyway. Kelly's reflection produced one distinction that unlocks the whole subject. He drew a line between hardship that serves the mission and hardship that exists simply because the organization has become accustomed to it.

That distinction does not belong only to submarines. It belongs to every organization that has lost a person it wished it could keep. What follows takes Kelly's insight off the boat and applies it wherever people lead.

People Do Not Experience an Organization as an Average

Here is the proposition at the center of this paper. It is worth stating plainly because many retention strategies quietly assume the opposite.

> ***People do not experience an organization as an average. One sufficiently destructive part of the experience can outweigh many good ones.***

We often manage retention as though it were an averaging problem. We assume that if we pile up enough positives, the total will carry the day, and that a person weighing sixteen good things

against two bad ones will naturally choose to stay. Sometimes that is true. But sometimes it is not, and when it is not, leaders are baffled because on paper the math seemed to be in their favor.

The math may not be the point. A person can value most of a profession and still leave because one or two parts of it have crossed a personal threshold. Those negatives are not simply averaged against the positives. Once something becomes intolerable, the decision may turn on that single factor.

If that is true, then the standard response can fail for a structural reason, not an effort reason. More money, more recognition, another program, another benefit; those are additions. But if the reason a person is leaving is something the organization must stop doing, additions cannot solve the problem. Recognition does not restore wasted time. A bonus does not create trust. A company picnic does not remove needless bureaucracy. Telling people they are valued does not repair chronic unpredictability. Positive experiences matter, but they cannot always average away a negative that has crossed the line.

Kelly arrived at this idea through an unlikely comparison between submarine officers and Navy SEALs. He notes that departing submarine officers often ask for more autonomy, more tactical focus, less administrative friction, more control over their time, and a tighter connection between daily work and mission. Naval Special Warfare, in his telling, offers much of that and still confronts retention challenges. His point is not that the two communities are equivalent. It is that a package of attractive positives may still be insufficient if one or two negatives become unacceptable. Retention, in other words, cannot always be treated as an averaging problem.

What the Research Says

Kelly's argument began with five conversations, not a dataset, and he says so. The value of the hypothesis is that several established lines of organizational thinking help explain why it is plausible.

The first is Robert Sutton and Huggy Rao's work at Stanford. Their book *The Friction Project* is subtitled *How Smart Leaders Make the Right Things Easier and the Wrong Things Harder*. Their central move is to reject the assumption that all friction is bad. Some friction is destructive: it wastes time, adds complexity, and makes worthwhile work harder. Other friction is useful because it slows people down where speed, convenience, or unchecked discretion would create risk. The leadership task is not to eliminate friction indiscriminately. It is to distinguish the friction that serves the work from the friction that merely grinds people down.

Kelly's logic of addition and subtraction also echoes Frederick Herzberg's classic motivation-hygiene distinction. Herzberg argued that the conditions that create dissatisfaction are not simply the reverse of the conditions that create satisfaction. Compensation, policy, supervision, and working conditions can become sources of dissatisfaction; achievement, responsibility, recognition, and the work itself operate differently. The theory has been debated and refined

over time, so it should not be treated as proof of Kelly's hypothesis. But its enduring insight is highly relevant here: removing a source of dissatisfaction and adding a source of motivation are not necessarily the same managerial act.

A third line comes from job embeddedness research. In "Why People Stay," Terence Mitchell, Brooks Holtom, Thomas Lee and their colleagues showed that staying reflects more than job satisfaction alone. Links to people and teams, fit with the organization and community, and the sacrifices associated with leaving all matter. That research shifts attention from a single attitude to the larger web of forces that hold a person in place.

Put these ideas beside Kelly's essay and a useful distinction appears: Compensation gives someone something to **lose** by leaving. Good leadership gives someone reasons to **want to stay**. And the best leadership does a third thing: it removes unnecessary reasons that make someone feel they **need to leave**.

That third possibility is the signature idea of this paper. Organizations are often more practiced at adding incentives and positive experiences than at identifying the small number of avoidable frictions that may be pushing good people toward the door.

The Bonus Paradox

Compensation matters in retention, but it does not explain every departure.

The Navy takes compensation seriously. MyNavy HR lists multiple incentive programs for nuclear-trained submarine officers, including Nuclear Officer Bonus and Incentive Pay and continuation bonuses. Kelly's larger observation is more revealing than the size of any one bonus: in his conversations with officers who chose to leave, he could not recall one naming money as the primary reason, and he had watched officers knowingly accept lower pay to separate.

That does not make compensation unimportant. Financial incentives can influence a marginal decision and removing them could make retention harder. But something can matter without being sufficient. When a person is willing to give up real money for a different life, the more useful leadership question is no longer only, What else can we offer? It is, What are they trying to escape?

That is the question this paper is built to answer.

Three Kinds of Friction

Kelly sorts retention friction into three categories: inherent, institutional, and command-created friction. For a broader organizational audience, I translate them here as mission, system, and leadership friction.

Mission friction is the difficulty inherent in doing something worthwhile. On a submarine it includes deployment, duty, separation from family, and the exacting standards required to

operate a nuclear-powered warship safely. In business it may be the hard client, the real deadline, the demanding standard, or the difficult work that matters precisely because the stakes are high. A leader can prepare people for mission friction, explain its purpose, and manage it well. A leader cannot, and should not, make all of it disappear.

System friction is the difficulty created by policies, structures, regulations, and systems beyond any one leader: career paths, approval chains, compliance requirements, compensation structures. A leader may not have the authority to remove system friction outright. But a leader can name its effects honestly, buffer the team where possible, and advocate upward rather than simply pass every inconvenience downward.

Leadership friction is the difficulty leaders themselves unnecessarily create. This is the category that belongs to us. The meeting that did not need to happen. The priority that changed without a mission reason. The request that became urgent only because someone delayed acting on it. Keeping people late because that is how it has always been done. Failing to delegate. Passing inconvenience downward because pushing back upward is harder. None of these makes the organization better at anything. None serves the mission. Much of it is within our power to remove.

If the central proposition of this paper is right, leadership friction may be where leaders have their greatest immediate leverage. Not because it is always the largest source of frustration, but because it is simultaneously avoidable and closest to their control.

Not All Friction Should Be Removed

Here is where an honest treatment of the subject has to slow down, because the easy version of this argument is wrong.

The easy version says: friction is the enemy, so remove it. Taken too far, that instinct becomes its own leadership failure. Nuclear power standards are difficult on purpose. Due diligence is difficult on purpose. Real training is demanding on purpose. Accountability creates friction. Ethical standards create friction. Saying no creates friction. In each case, the difficulty is not wasted; it is part of the mechanism by which the right thing gets protected and the wrong thing gets made harder. That is Sutton and Rao's essential point.

Sometimes great leadership does not remove friction. Sometimes it adds friction deliberately because doing the wrong thing has become too easy. A leader who makes it effortless to cut a corner, skip a control, or approve without scrutiny has not reduced friction in an admirable sense. That leader has removed the friction that was doing important work.

So the goal is not a frictionless organization. The goal is discernment. The leader's job is not to make everything easy. It is to know what should be hard and what should not be hard; then defend the first category as fiercely as they attack the second. In the Petersen framework this is the province of **Judgment**: the capacity to distinguish necessary difficulty from organizational nonsense. Without judgment, "reduce friction" becomes an excuse to lower standards, while

“maintain standards” becomes an excuse to tolerate waste. Judgment keeps a leader from confusing the two.

Running Friction Through the Six Dimensions

The Petersen Leadership Philosophy examines leadership across six dimensions. Unnecessary friction does not belong to only one of them. It touches all six, which is why it is useful material for developing the whole leader. Each dimension asks a different friction question.

Dimension	The Friction Question
Character	Will I absorb or remove unnecessary hardship rather than simply pass it downward?
Style	Am I creating friction because I expect everyone to work, communicate, and decide the way I do?
Judgment	Can I distinguish necessary difficulty from organizational nonsense?
Culture	What behaviors or routines have become normal even though they no longer serve us?
Execution	Which meetings, reports, approvals, priorities, or last-minute requests impede rather than advance the mission?
Life	What is our organization unnecessarily taking from people’s lives?

Read the questions top to bottom and a pattern emerges. Character determines whether a leader is willing to absorb or remove unnecessary friction rather than simply pass it on. Style reveals how much friction a leader may manufacture by insisting on a single way of working. Judgment governs the distinction between necessary and needless difficulty. Culture is where friction hides in plain sight, protected by the words “that’s just how we do it.” Execution is where friction is often most visible and fixable. Life is where the cost is ultimately paid, in evenings, weekends, attention, and energy the organization did not need to take.

Legacy: The Question Underneath

Beyond the six dimensions sits the question every leader eventually has to answer, whether they choose to or not.

> ***Were people better because I led them, or did they have to survive the way I led them?***

That is the Legacy question, and unnecessary friction is one of its sharpest tests. A leader can hit every number and still leave behind people who spent years working around difficulties that leader created. A wardroom event does not erase routinely wasted time. Recognition does not restore lost trust. Professional development does not repair a schedule repeatedly disrupted without purpose. Positive experiences matter, but they cannot automatically neutralize an intolerable negative.

There is a line from the Petersen Philosophy worth holding here: how you live shapes how you lead, and how you lead shapes how you live. Leadership friction runs in both directions. Unnecessary hardship does not stay at the office. It follows people home, into the parts of life that matter most: family, health, relationships, attention, and the stops along the way that no one gets back. The strongest argument for removing needless friction may be that the organization experiences it as inefficiency, while the individual experiences it as life.

A Tool: The Leadership Friction Audit

Reflection is not enough. A leader or leadership team can turn the argument into practice by running a Leadership Friction Audit at least quarterly, and whenever turnover or burnout begins to signal a deeper problem.

The Leadership Friction Audit asks six questions, in order:

- **What are we making harder than it needs to be?**List it before defending it.
- **Which difficulties genuinely serve the mission?**Protect them, and name why each earns its place.
- **Which frustrations come from systems we cannot control but could buffer or challenge?**Decide where to advocate upward.
- **Which frustrations arecreatedby me or my leadership team?**Put a name on what belongs to us.
- **What are our best people tolerating rather than telling us about?**Ask before they decide silence is easier.
- **If one of our best people resigned tomorrow, what would we privately suspect was the real reason?**

The sixth question is powerful because it forces leaders to confront what may never appear in a formal exit explanation. Leaders often have a private suspicion about why someone is reaching the end of their tolerance. The audit's purpose is to surface that suspicion before the resignation, while there may still be time to act.

End the audit with three decisions:one friction to remove, one system friction to buffer or challenge, and one necessary friction to defend and explain.

Notice what the audit changes. It moves the retention conversation from What else can we give them so they will stay? to a harder question: What are we doing that we ought to stop? The first

question may still matter. The second is the one leaders too easily miss.

The Uncomfortable Question

Jordan Kelly began with a question about submarine officers: why do good officers leave good jobs? It is a question every leader should consider because the answer is not always the one we reach for first.

Sometimes people leave because the mission is no longer right for them. Sometimes circumstances change. Sometimes another opportunity simply calls, and no leader could or should have prevented it. Retaining everyone is not the goal; retaining the right people is. No leader should engineer away the genuine demands of meaningful work simply to improve a statistic.

But sometimes good people leave good organizations for reasons leadership created and leadership could have removed.

The answer is not to make demanding work undemanding. Leadership is not the elimination of hardship. Character sometimes requires hardship. Excellence requires standards. Execution requires discipline. Meaningful work is often difficult because it matters. The responsibility of leadership is to know the difference: never remove the friction that makes the mission better, and be relentless about removing the friction that only makes people's lives worse.

That leaves the most important retention question, and it is not the one leaders usually ask. We ask, What more can we give our people so they will stay? The better question is simpler and more uncomfortable:

> ***What are we doing that is giving our best people a reason to leave?***

Sources and Further Reading

- Jordan Kelly, "Why Good Officers Leave Good Jobs," LinkedIn, August 8, 2026.
- Robert I. Sutton and Huggy Rao, *The Friction Project: How Smart Leaders Make the Right Things Easier and the Wrong Things Harder* (St. Martin's Press, 2024).
- Frederick Herzberg, Bernard Mausner, and Barbara Bloch Snyderman, *The Motivation to Work*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley, 1959).
- Terence R. Mitchell, Brooks C. Holtom, Thomas W. Lee, Chris J. Sablynski, and Miriam Erez, "Why People Stay: Using Job Embeddedness to Predict Voluntary Turnover," *Academy of Management Journal* 44, no. 6 (2001): 1102–1121.
- MyNavy HR, Submarine Officer (PERS-42), "Incentive Programs," including Nuclear Officer Bonus and Incentive Pay and Nuclear Officer Continuation Bonus, accessed August 9, 2026.