



Soldiers from the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, attend the Sex Signals class 22 September 2009 at Fort Hood, Texas. The class presented diverse skits depicting the adverse consequences of sexual harassment and assault. Despite the introduction of many such training programs, concerns have persisted over many years regarding issues related to sexual harassment, reports of prejudice, and unequal treatment of women and minorities in the military. This has led the U.S. Army to introduce Project Inclusion in a more determined effort to eradicate unacceptable attitudes and behaviors, and to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion across the force with the aim of building cohesive teams. This effort includes a worldwide series of listening sessions, in depth investigation of allegations of racial disparity in the military justice system, and removal of photos from officer promotion boards, which began in August 2020. (Photo by Sgt. Rebekah Lampman, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division Public Affairs)

Operationalizing Culture

Addressing the Army's People Crisis

Col. Joseph E. Escandon, U.S. Army

Our United States Military is an institution that embraces diversity and inclusion, and rejects hate and prejudice in all forms ... These things have no place in our military because they can degrade the morale, cohesion, and readiness of our force. This is why we must keep working to do better.

—Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper

In his “Message to the Force—Feedback on Diversity and Inclusion in the Military,” Secretary of Defense Mark Esper expressed the need to address and

improve racial diversity in the Armed Forces, calling this the “first steps to drive a cultural shift and create lasting change in the DoD [Department of Defense].”¹ In an environment marked by a global pandemic, large-scale protests for social justice, calls to rename Army installations, and the death of Spc. Vanessa Guillen, Esper’s direction is not only timely, but it is also necessary. In full support of this effort are serving and retired senior military leaders who have powerfully expressed the need for change not out of political expediency but out of strategic necessity. Fortunately, the Army is well positioned to tackle this complex challenge. During an October 2019 speech, Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville clearly articulated what he sees as the service’s number one priority—people.² McConville noted the need to transform not only how people are managed but also how they are treated.

McConville’s intent was amplified by publication of the “Army People Strategy,” a document that provides the Army with a clearly defined vision and strategic direction to meet that intent. The document focuses on implementation of personnel policy, accessions, and improved quality of life, with the intent to ensure readiness and build combat power by managing talent and building cohesive teams. The strategy clearly supports development of the multi-domain operations concept, noting that where the

United States may have lost its decisive edge in technology to adversaries such as China and Russia, people will be its “enduring strategic advantage.”³

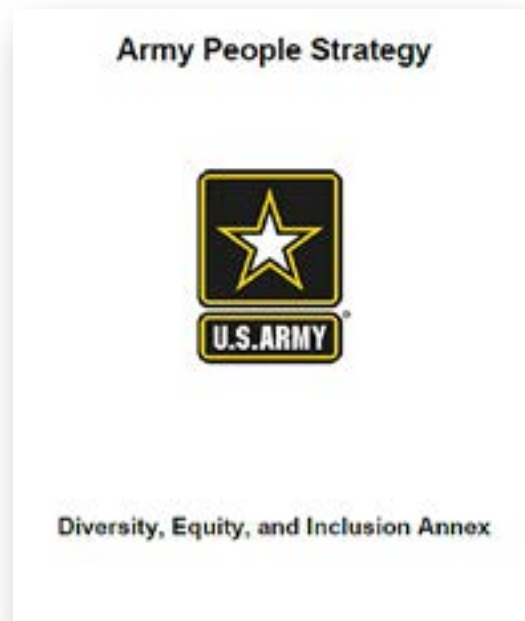
The “Army People Strategy” is built on a framework of four lines of effort: acquire, develop, employ, and retain talent to achieve strategic outcomes, and it lists culture as one of three key enabling objectives. The strategy provides a sound framework for defining and thinking about culture, but given recent events, cultural change is now more than an enabler, it is a decisive fight requiring a dedicated effort to ensure strategic guidance is executed at the lowest eche-

lons. Only the operationalization of culture at the brigade-and-below level will provide the leadership and focus required for success. This means using the Army’s operations process to translate strategic guidance into action that results in change.

Why Culture Matters

According to the “Army People Strategy,” “culture consists of the foundational values, beliefs and behaviors that drive an organization’s social environment, and it plays a vital role in mission accomplishment.”⁴ Esper definitively links culture to performance, and historical analysis supports this proposition. As one scholar noted in his examination of the Western way of war, while superiority in weapons are important, it is the

values of discipline, morale, initiative, and flexibility that are the true measures of overall effectiveness.⁵ By the same measure, negative aspects of culture degrade readiness and performance. Hence, the “Army People Strategy” discusses culture across a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum is the positive—those ideal cultural aspects embodied in the seven Army Values that build the kind of Army to which we aspire. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the negative—sexual harassment and sexual assault, suicide, discrimination, hazing/bullying, domestic violence, extremism, retaliation, and reprisals—behaviors and attitudes that erode unit readiness by destroying the trust, cohesion, and



For those interested in reading “Army People Strategy: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Annex,” visit https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/the_army_people_strategy_diversity_equity_and_inclusion_annex_2020_09_01_signed_final.pdf.

teamwork that are central to effectiveness.⁶ Over the last two decades, some of these issues posed significant institutional challenges to the Army, with sexual harassment/assault response and prevention (SHARP) and suicide prevention as strategic priorities. Army leaders have also

Leadership: The Decisive Element of Combat Power?

The “Army People Strategy” tells us why culture is important to the Army, provides a vision for culture, and prescribes three instruments for affecting that vision:

“The complexity of the current and future environments consists of even greater challenges not just posed by the evolving character of war but also by the changing social fabric of our nation.”

contended with disabusing the force of toxic leadership, enabling gender integration, and once again, addressing racial discrimination.

In the past several years, multiple negative examples have called service culture and leadership into question and eroded the American public’s confidence in the U.S. military. One example is the revelation that U.S. Navy SEALs may have been involved in murder, war crimes, and drug use while deployed. This brought into question whether the SEALs not only have a discipline problem but also a larger problem with their culture.⁷ The Marines United social media scandal of 2017 involved male marines posting nude photos of female marines and exhibiting misogynistic behavior and attitudes. Appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Marine Corps commandant Gen. Robert Neller appeared both frustrated and disappointed as he tried to reassure senators that this incident did not reflect Marine Corps values and culture or the behavior of most marines. Questions as to the veracity of this claim remain, especially as additional incidents and issues continue to be revealed.⁸

Nonetheless, overall institutional service culture reflects positive values, as evidenced by the performance of the U.S. military over nearly twenty years of war. This is in sharp contrast to the Vietnam War, where Army culture failed to withstand significant stress. Effective military culture has enabled an extremely high level of unit cohesion and combat effectiveness while adapting to significant challenges. The complexity of the current and future environments consists of even greater challenges not just posed by the evolving character of war but also by the changing social fabric of our nation. Navigating these challenges will require examining them through the holistic lens of culture.

Define: Build upon the positive and powerful aspects of current Army culture, creating a people-focused Army culture that destroys harmful behaviors

and builds trust across all formations. Amplify the positive behaviors that align with our vision of cohesive teams ... Incorporate new cultural elements to meet the challenges of the Information Age.

Drive: Leaders drive change in culture by clearly defining it, communicating it openly and effectively, inspiring others, and modeling it conspicuously and authentically.

Align: Conduct periodic organizational cultural assessments and integrate all people data to dynamically assess, realign, and redefine Army culture as our strategy and mission demand.⁹

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Leaders use these instruments to determine not only why culture must change, but also “how it should change.”¹⁰

Effective and sustainable change requires leadership, which is the decisive element of combat power. Of the three instruments, drive, which the strategy clearly links to leadership, is central to any process. Drive directs leaders

bearer for his organization and led by personal example—defining, communicating, inspiring, and modeling the culture reflected in the Marine Corps values. He set policy, approved the doctrine taught in Marine Corps leader development courses, and selected leaders committed to those values and who enforced policy and standards.

“Drive, which the strategy clearly links to leadership, is central to any process. Drive directs leaders to define, communicate, inspire, and model to achieve culture change.”

to define, communicate, inspire, and model to achieve culture change. These descriptors of leadership by personal example are absolutely necessary but do not account for the requirements of organizational- and strategic-level leadership.¹¹ While direct-level leadership influences individuals, squads, platoons, and companies, it is not effective in leading change in large organizations and institutions where leaders perform leadership not only by example but also through a variety of tools such as leader development programs, policies, training guidance, and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Any comprehensive approach to culture must take these into account.



U.S. soldiers assigned to the 1-502nd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), provide security 15 July 2017 during simulated force-on-force training exercise as part of Network Integration Evaluation (NIE) 17.2 at Fort Bliss, TX. Effective military operational culture that instills a high level of discipline enables an extremely high level of unit cohesion and combat effectiveness. (Photo by Pfc. Joseph Friend, U.S. Army)

Review of Neller’s congressional testimony in the Marines United case provides clear understanding of why the drive instrument must be more comprehensive. Neller’s frustration was on full display as he questioned how the Marines United scandal not only occurred but also involved leaders. As the commandant of the Marine Corps, Neller, like many senior leaders, was the standard

Nonetheless, at some point, personal example and the modeling of core values failed to trickle down to those who perpetrated Marines United.

Even in an idealized world where leadership at every

level models core values, personal misconduct and criminal behavior will still exist. However, the examples noted above indicate more than just individual discipline problems. They also reveal that the fix is beyond the drive instrument articulated by the strategy. Why is this so? The answer is found in the concept of complexity. Today’s military services have been at war for nearly twenty years; at the

same time, they are challenged by the impacts of that war and significant social and political change in the society that they serve to protect. As time advances, so does the velocity of that change, requiring adaptation at an unprecedented rate.

In 1992, presidential candidate Bill Clinton advocated a policy change that would allow homosexuals to serve openly in the military. Following a lengthy and

heated political debate, the 1993 compromise policy “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was put in place. After nearly two decades, the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act of 2010 removed the ban. When the law finally took effect, it happened as an almost nonevent. Changes in American social attitudes, as well as a substantial amount of time to absorb these changes, enabled military culture to adapt to a new normal. Today, the military is faced with multiple, layered chal-

and ethics. The “USSOCOM Comprehensive Review” came to the conclusion that while USSOCOM does not have a “systemic ethics” issue, evidence revealed cases where “USSOCOM’s culture focused on SOF [special operations forces] employment and mission accomplishment to the detriment of leadership, discipline and accountability.”¹³ In support of this conclusion, the report highlighted several issues. First, continuous operational tempo over nearly two

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lenges—sexual harassment/assault, suicides, and gender integration into combat occupational specialties, just to name a few. Compounding the problem is that the effective rate of required change is immediate. This produces a level of complexity that challenges our traditional notion of military leadership. In his discussion of the impact of complexity on problem-solving and planning processes, retired Brig. Gen. Huba Wass de Czege highlighted the limitations of traditional notions of military leadership:

The Greeks taught Western Civilization to think heroically, to create a vision of the future of an idealized “end” one desires, and to overcome any and all obstacles to force that ideal creation of one’s mind onto the real world.¹²

Unfortunately, the complex, adaptive nature of today’s environment is resistant to the solutions that heroic leadership by itself can generate. Tackling this level of complexity still requires heroic leadership to understand a problem, visualize a desired environment, and then drive change. But driving change also requires a comprehensive approach that penetrates to the lowest echelons and is resilient to the negative influence of leaders displaying counterproductive leadership; in other words, those who refuse to implement, let alone embrace, culture change.

Culture and Ethics in Question: A Case Study

Following several recent high-profile cases of misconduct, the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) undertook an examination of its culture

decades of war has challenged unit integrity and leader development while also eroding readiness. Second, the report noted that “the normalization of unit disaggregation displaces leaders from units” in order to meet overwhelming requirements.¹⁴ In other words, multiple requirements pulled leaders away from their primary duties, leaving less experienced, and perhaps less capable and mature leaders, in charge. Third, the report highlighted insufficient junior leader development, oftentimes at the mercy of operational requirements resulting in an “unbalanced approach to professional military education” and degraded discipline and accountability.¹⁵ Of greatest concern was the revelation that leadership development was outsourced instead of handled by those meant to do so. Finally, the report notes that operators with combat deployments “are held as an almost infallible standard bearer for the rest of the organization to emulate—seemingly if it is a positive or negative standard.”¹⁶ This cultural phenomena is a direct challenge to the professional military ethic.

The USSOCOM review is prescient in that it provides insight into problems among a force that is composed of some of America’s most capable professionals and led by some of its most capable leaders. SOF operate in small elements that are trusted to perform with limited supervision and to the highest level of disciplined initiative, which includes ethical conduct. Ultimately, the review reveals that the values of the organization are not, in some cases, penetrating down to the lowest levels, despite the personal example set by senior leaders. These issues should not be considered SOF unique. Although not the subject

of this article, many of these problems can be found in the Army and pose significant challenges to unit culture. The USSOCOM review also acknowledges that previous efforts to address some of these issues were attempted but failed. The report emphasized that a strong implementation plan and the will to execute it were essential to affect-

in the processes and outcomes. To accomplish this purpose, brigade commanders must operationalize culture through the operations process—understand, visualize, describe, direct, assess, and lead.¹⁹ Before culture can be operationalized, the brigade commander must consider a few key factors attributable to the environment.



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ing real change, thereby acknowledging that leadership alone is insufficient to address the issue.¹⁷

Driving Culture: Heroic Leadership and Operational Approach

While heroic leadership is the decisive element for driving change and managing culture, complexity requires that leadership must be exercised through an operational approach. According to Army Doctrinal Publication 5-0, *The Operations Process*, “Commanders complete their visualization by conceptualizing an *operational approach*—a broad description of the mission, operational concepts, tasks, and actions required to accomplish the mission.”¹⁸ Employment of an operational approach facilitates inclusion of the define and align instruments of culture. It also allows Army leaders to understand the complexity inherent in the strategic environment, thereby enabling the Army at echelon to adapt as required. Finally, the operational approach allows brigade and battalion commanders to operationalize the strategic guidance of the “Army People Strategy” and drive change down to the lowest level.

At the tip of the spear are company commanders, who exercise direct leadership and influence. However, they are at the entry level of command, have the least training and experience with the concept of culture, and are at risk of viewing change as compliance or political correctness instead of a critical enabler of combat readiness. In order to influence this key audience, brigade commanders must lead change through personal example and a dedicated operational approach, thereby ensuring that company-level commanders are invested

First, an operational approach that accounts for the complexity of the environment is required to define, drive, and align culture within an organization. Over the past twenty years, the Army has largely dealt with issues one at a time, though attempts were made to integrate these programs (e.g., the Ready and Resilient Campaign). Second, culture is not just commander business, it is leader business. Officers, warrant officers, and especially noncommissioned officers at all echelons of the brigade must possess a shared vision of unit culture. Driving culture to the lowest level requires that every leader understands his or her role, works to achieve tangible results, and is held accountable for the outcome. Third, senior leaders cannot assume that their understanding of culture, values, and ethics is the same as their subordinates’ understanding of those concepts. While the Army values, the Army profession, and the Army ethic are taught in the training and education base, they are not uniformly reinforced in the operational force, and hence, may be seen as ideals that do not necessarily apply in the “real world” of their unit. Immature and incompetent leaders reinforce this notion. Finally, senior leaders should not assume that subordinate leaders understand culture or are necessarily thinking about it in a focused, deliberate, or integrated way. Without this cognitive structure, leaders will fail to adapt, let alone see the need to adapt.

Operationalizing Culture: A Way

While the operational approach is the solution for solving the problem by changing the environment from its current state to the desired state, the operations process

provides the means to implement the approach while ensuring an enduring focus on what must be one of the commander's top priorities. The process allows the commander to enable change in time and space to not only achieve the vision but to also address issues of immediate concern. It also allows the commander to apply and prioritize resources and policies as required and sets the conditions to re-

Culture. This two-word phrase, built around the unit's moniker—STRIKE—served as a common language that every leader and soldier in the BCT understood and embraced. It served to link the unit's proud heritage and identity with standards and expectations. Additionally, the intent of this big idea was to tackle all of the challenges, described above, through a holistic and integrated approach

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quest support from higher echelons to solve problems that he or she cannot. Finally, the operationalization of culture sends a clear message to subordinate commanders, leaders, soldiers, and families that adaptation in pursuit of building cohesive teams is integral to winning.

The following example is provided as one way that a commander can operationalize culture. This example is based on my experience as the commander of 2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT) “STRIKE,” 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), from 2017 to 2019. Prior to assuming command, I viewed culture as a key pillar in mission accomplishment for several reasons. Like any BCT commander, I wanted to lead a band of brothers and sisters comprised of physically and mentally tough, steely-eyed killers able to adapt to every challenge and accomplish any mission. While that was my overall vision, my experience taught me the need to address some specific culture challenges requiring change. First, I wanted to transform our warfighter culture from one that had been focused on counterinsurgency to one that met the requirements for high-intensity, large-scale combat operations. The second challenge was to address the proliferation of negative behaviors and attitudes that contribute to the degradation of standards, discipline, and overall readiness. Lastly, I sought to improve leader, especially junior noncommissioned officer, and soldier development through a positive approach. This meant changing focus and teaching soldiers what they should be, know, and do instead of focusing on telling them what not to do (the “Don’t” approach) as espoused by the weekly safety brief.²⁰

My intent was to create a comprehensive approach to culture with a simple yet powerful narrative—STRIKE

that incorporated resources with the expertise and energy of leaders. We would not look at a sexual harassment/assault problem as a single issue with a specific program. Instead, we looked at it through the lens of overall culture with the intent to address the root causes. Hence, I dedicated significant time and effort to STRIKE Culture, not just through direct leadership and personal example but through a deliberate process and continuous engagement with all levels of command.

Understand and Visualize: The Culture Seminar

In order to define, drive, and align culture, a commander must start with understanding and a vision. To lead effective change, a commander must create shared understanding and a shared vision. Subordinate commanders and leaders must then own that vision through a common purpose and language. The brigade commander's key tool for leading change is his or her leader professional development program. For STRIKE Culture, step one of operationalizing culture was to leverage the leader professional development program to deliver a day-long culture seminar. The audience was composed of the BCT, battalion, and company-level command teams, all field grade officers and BCT primary staff, and a host of subject-matter experts and enablers from across the installation. This structure was designed to build a team of teams capable of using their experience and expertise to identify problems and then develop solutions that the teams would be responsible for executing. Participants not organic to the BCT were invited to share their expertise and divergent views. The seminar also included a guest speaker from

the Naval Postgraduate School who discussed the importance of organizational culture and various models for building culture.²¹

Following this presentation, the audience was divided into seven groups, each led by a battalion commander and command sergeant major, and focused on a specific problem set (e.g., sexual harassment/assault, suicide, soldier development, and unit standards). The groups were charged with developing potential solutions and metrics for assessment. Near the end of the day, each group provided the audience an overview of its findings and recommendations. My final comments synthesized our shared

strengthening organizational climate. For the second LOE, we used STRIKE Tough—the optimization of physical and mental performance. For the third LOE, we used STRIKE Families, which was closely linked to the Family Readiness Group Steering Committee and objectives associated with that program. While we used STRIKE Culture for the first LOE to better align with the division, all of our programs were components of STRIKE Culture.

The “Army People Strategy” discusses the use of people data to manage culture. Our campaign used such data, focusing on established data collection streams such as reenlistment data, command climate surveys, crime trends,

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understanding and vision, ensuring the BCT’s senior leadership was invested in the process and the outcome and understood culture was a priority.

Describe and Direct: The Culture Campaign Plan

The natural outgrowth of the culture seminar was to refine the operational approach into a campaign plan. This meant building a conceptual framework with which we could structure the problems, solutions, and assessments under distinct lines of effort (LOE) that tied the vision to outcomes. Fortunately, our division leadership had used a similar process and was also building a campaign plan. We were able to adopt their structure and tailor it for the BCT-and-below fight. Once complete, our campaign plan was captured on three PowerPoint slides, keeping it simple and accessible.

The division campaign plan was composed of three LOEs: (1) enhance the climate and mobilize the culture, (2) strengthen and maintain optimal human performance, and (3) strengthen Army families to thrive. These three LOEs provided us with a framework into which we could easily integrate our own developed operational approach. For the first LOE, the BCT used a developed objective simply known as STRIKE Culture, which focused on leader and soldier character development, unit cohesion, and

and sexual harassment/assault statistics, to name a few. Such data allowed us to focus on specific issues, primarily negative, and determine if our programs and policies were having the intended effect. Creating new data collection requirements was only done to address the toughest, most complex issues; otherwise, there was great risk of the campaign devolving into a data collection effort, thereby creating a distractor for leaders and sending the wrong message about the culture that the unit sought to develop and sustain.

While we used discrete data sets to address specific negative behaviors, we also had a need to assess STRIKE Culture on a large scale to determine our lethality and unit cohesion. This was expressed in our streamer program. Adding to the division’s air assault and physical fitness streamers were BCT marksmanship, physical toughness, and discipline streamers that were awarded to company-level formations that met established performance standards. Units then displayed these streamers on their guidons. The purpose of these awards was to generate a commitment to excellence and a competitive spirit between organizations—the more units that had the streamers, the greater the impact of STRIKE Culture. This approach also sent the message that our culture was about uplifting unit morale, cohesion, teamwork, and discipline. Leaders at every level worked hard to earn the right to



Soldiers from the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), watch as a CH-47 Chinook flown by soldiers from the 101st Combat Aviation Brigade, 101st Airborne, sling loads the Tactical Control Node-Light 15 June 2017 at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Building effective teams requires trust, cohesion, and teamwork, as well as leveraging the talents of people. (Photo by Sgt. Bradford Alex, U.S. Army)

display their streamers, in the process building lethal, high-performing teams.²²

Lead and Assess: The Blackheart Pulse

The Blackheart Pulse (BHP) was a BCT battle rhythm event that was executed once a month and given the same priority as the training, command and staff, and unit status report meetings.²³ This was done to ensure a focus on culture and the campaign plan. The BHP's audience consisted of BCT and battalion command teams, key BCT staff, and representatives from support organizations such as embedded behavioral health and the Military and Family Life Counselor. Representatives from installation support services also attended for situational awareness and to provide subject-matter expertise. The BCT chaplain served as the meeting's lead action officer, ensuring coordination, integration, and synchronization of issues and special projects. The brigade's family readiness liaison was also a key player and created a link between the BHP and the family readiness steering committee.

The BHP was an evolution of what was previously known as the high-risk soldier meeting. This change evolved from the requirement to monitor and assess the progress of the campaign and focus on issues that were identified as part of the brigade's fight. The meeting agenda consisted of several phases. Each meeting started with discussion of a focused subject, such as suicide awareness, drunk driving, etc. This focus area was the result of previous commander guidance, which directed the staff and support agencies to provide an analysis of the problem set as well as potential solutions. The presentation was used to generate discussion, primarily focused on battalion command teams. The next phase of the meeting allowed time for each battalion command team to provide a short brief on unit trends and discuss its own culture campaigns. The last phase of the meeting was focused on targeting aimed at proactively addressing templated issues. This phase began with a review of the biorhythm, an annual calendar that examined trends associated with particular times of the year. For example, we looked at summer as the time



Command Sgt. Maj. Thomas Conn, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) command sergeant major, presents a streamer to Battery C, 1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment in Spring 2019 at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Streamers are awarded to company-level formations to generate a commitment to excellence and a competitive spirit between organizations. This approach lifts unit morale and enhances unit cohesion, teamwork, and discipline. (Photo by Major Kevin T. Andersen, U.S. Army)

when soldiers and families would be doing more outdoor activities and be at a higher level of risk. We also reviewed historical data, which indicated times when we would see increased levels of high-risk behavior. The most important effect of the meeting was the ability to maintain focus on assessing and building unit culture with a comprehensive approach in time and space.

Common Sense Culture

The introduction and foreword of the seminal work on training, *Common Sense Training*, note that the U.S. Army's overwhelming defeat of Iraq during the first Gulf War was the result of the post-Vietnam renaissance in training, not high-tech weaponry. Like the book, this article aspires to be "a working philosophy for leaders."²⁴ The book emphasizes that "leadership is so much a part of the conduct of training that at times it is difficult to tell where one stops

and the other starts," and so it is with the operationalization of culture.²⁵ Training is, and will remain, the most important activity that the Army does to prepare to fight and win on the battlefield, and that priority should not change. Nonetheless, the complex challenges of the future will require that we apply focus and resources to culture. The "Army People Strategy" provides solid strategic guidance to do this, but like training, culture must be a philosophy applied by leaders. Similarly, leadership must be intertwined with the operationalization of culture at every level. It is simply no longer enough to address issues as singular problems requiring a special program that is not connected to a larger operational approach. Every commander must look at culture as a mission essential task list, understand the current proficiency of those tasks, and determine how to sustain and improve accomplishment of those tasks; but more importantly, he or she should also build an enduring

culture that enables trust, cohesion, and teamwork. The changing face of our Army and the requirement to successfully conduct multi-domain operations demands

that culture be a priority at every level of the Army. It also demands that commanders have a solid plan and the will to carry it out. ■

Notes

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