Soldiers from 1st Battalion, 77th Armored Regiment, attack an objective during a rotation at the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California, November 2020. Unit leadership has worked to improve the unit's culture to increase readiness and reduce harmful behaviors. (Photo by author)

Culture Change and People First

Creating a Culture that Acts as the Antibody to the Corrosive Elements

Lt. Col. Michael Soyka, U.S. Army

The U.S. Army announced a series of "People First" initiatives in the wake of the 2020 Fort Hood Report. The report provided a scathing indictment of the culture that existed at Fort Hood, which allowed the counterproductive elements of sexual assault, suicide, and racial extremism to fester.[1] Army initiatives sought to change not just the climate of organizations but the entire culture, stating "we must define, drive, and align our culture with our vision of cohesive teams."[2] The Army, however, is comprised of vastly differing organizations, and the strategic imperative of removing harmful behaviors collides with the realities of missions and constraints at the battalion and brigade levels. The Army currently struggles with a recruiting problem that has forced Army senior leaders to adjust the end strength of the Army and could cause a deficit of as many as thirty thousand soldiers below its required number by 2023.[3] There are many reasons for those recruiting issues, including the low percentage of America's youth who are eligible to enlist and a difficult jobs market, but internal to the Army we must acknowledge that part of the problem lies with the culture of our units. If potential recruits hear horror stories from enlisted soldiers and the headlines parents read are filled with stories of counterproductive leaders, recruitment will continue to be a challenge.
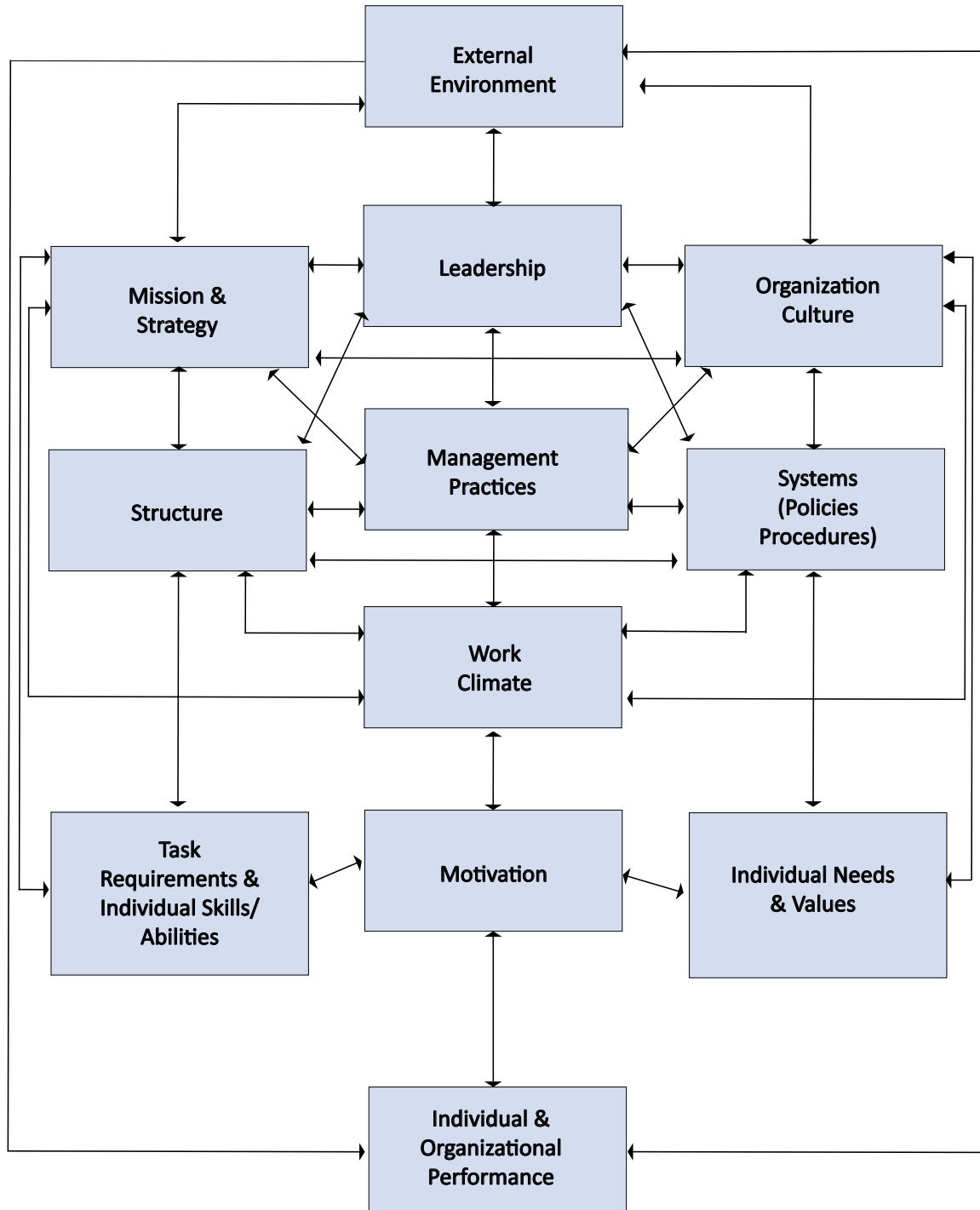
Many leaders across the Army have a desire to change their culture to better meet the dual needs of maintaining readiness and minimizing harmful behaviors. However, there is a lack of a systemic method of understanding what needs to change and how to go about making meaningful and long-lasting changes to the culture of units. Over the last two years, the leaders of 1st Battalion, 77th Armored Regiment (1-77 AR) embarked on a planned cultural change to better align its actions, values, and culture to both increase its organizational effectiveness and meet the imperative of reducing harmful behaviors. This change is still ongoing in the organization, but some of the changes we made and the overarching methodology may be useful to other leaders who are trying to do the same for their organizations.

Many leadership articles state that culture is "the way we do things here," but that is a superficial view. Edgar Schein, an MIT professor emeritus, defines three levels of culture: artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions.[4] Artifacts are the things we visually see upon entering an organization: unit T-shirts, cavalry Stetsons, and maroon berets. The artifacts are the easiest to see and the easiest to change. The next level is the espoused values including ideas like the Army values, dedication to maintenance in an armored brigade combat team, or humans treated as more important than hardware in the special operations community.

The deepest and most difficult level of culture to change is underlying assumptions, and those may be at odds with the espoused values in a dysfunctional culture. Assumptions that pacing items (e.g., tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles) are more important than people, that higher headquarters units do not care about work-life balance, or that people of a different race/gender/faith are not as valued, demonstrate a conflict between espoused values and underlying assumptions and are common in many units. Leaders in organizations must specifically look to understand where there is a disconnect between the levels of culture and must leverage significant time and resources to help resolve those conflicts over time.

The first step to cultural change is understanding what needs to change in the organization. Large organizations are complicated, and making changes without a full understanding of the interconnected system of the organization can result in unintended consequences. Having a model allows the leader and his or her team to better understand what needs to change to get to the desired end state. The Burke-Litwin model of organizational performance and change (as shown in figure 1, page 69) is an open systems model that breaks

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(Figure from W. Warner Burke, *Organizational Change: Theory and Practice* [2011])

Figure 1. Burke-Litwin Model for Organizational Performance and Change

the organization down into twelve variables and uses arrows to demonstrate which variables most directly influence the others.[5] Through its form, this model acknowledges the external environment is an input that the leader of an organization cannot directly control, and that the purpose of any change is to improve individual and organizational performance.

The Burke-Litwin model, through its structure, demonstrates that no one can change culture by just changing culture. Rather, the organizational variables that relate to culture should change to effect change at all three cultural levels. The Burke-Litwin model is arranged also to demonstrate that the more difficult change is in the transformational variables at the top of the model (mission and strategy, leadership, and organizational culture). Those variables have more weight, and changing them must be planned and aligned as they affect the whole system. Changes in the transactional variables are necessary but not sufficient to truly effect change in the upper portions of the model.

Transformational Factors

Employees believe that *mission and strategy* are the central purpose of the organization. This, for many military units, is a clearly defined set of mission essential tasks (MET), which are dictated by their higher headquarters, and while there is some space for commanders at the battalion level and below to adjust within those specific boundaries, it is usually in terms of prioritizing one of those METs over others. Since the Army is a collection of subcultures, some of the levers of change available to other types of organizations may not be adjusted. A combined arms battalion will always be called upon to conduct an attack, a movement to contact, an area defense, area security, and expeditionary deployment activities. Leaders within those organizations will prioritize those METs in conjunction with their higher commanders to prepare for anticipated conflicts but will only ignore one of those METs to the peril of the organization.

Leadership is also at times an immutable object for lower-echelon commanders, though the recent changes in the talent management process have allowed commanders some leeway in what type of leaders are recruited and assigned to their organization (albeit with a lag time of about one year). For the most part, battalion commanders are not given the ability to "get the right people on the bus" but rather can adjust "who sits where on the bus" in their organization with the notable exception of those commands that carefully select those entering (special operations forces units and to a lesser extent security force assistance brigades).[6] Internal to a brigade, battalion commanders do have some influence to bring in the right captain from the S-3 shop to help move their change forward, but mostly, they have an influence on moving the right people into the key roles of platoon sergeant and squad leader. Changes in the squad leaders, platoon leaders, and platoon sergeants can be very consequential in adjusting the climate of the organization and by extension, can be either reinforcing or inhibiting to a culture change initiative. Leader selection at that level is one of the most important jobs of a battalion commander, and while manning constraints may impose limits on the ability to make wholesale change, ensuring incoming leaders understand the vision and help move a change effort forward is critical.

If a battalion commander finds leadership is counterproductive at the lower levels, it must be addressed, or a culture of trust cannot be established in the organization. Leaders must be willing to take immediate action to address those problems and utilize all available tools, from sensing sessions to defense organizational climate surveys, to understand where there may be issues. Positive, inspired leadership is required at all levels to drive change, and commanders must ensure that within the limits of their control, only leaders who demonstrate those qualities are leading our soldiers.

Culture is the one portion of the transformational factors a battalion-level commander can most influence. As stated, no one can change culture by changing culture, but other variables can be leveraged to make the change. No one can ignore that the other two transformational factors have limited mobility, no one can change to a culture that does not align with the leadership or the mission, and critically, no one can change to a culture that reduces the overall organizational performance. That said, there is still a lot of room for movement in most organizations when it comes to culture. A leader can investigate first to see if there is a disconnect between espoused values and underlying assumptions. The most obvious place I noticed when I took command of 1-77 AR was we espoused commitment to the organization and to the Nation, but the underlying

Members of 1st Battalion, 77th Armored Regiment, compete in a five-versus-five pugil stick fighting event 11 December 2020 during the Commander's Cup competition at Fort Bliss, Texas. This event was one of five in the Commanders Cup, designed to build competitiveness and morale within the battalion. (Photo by author)
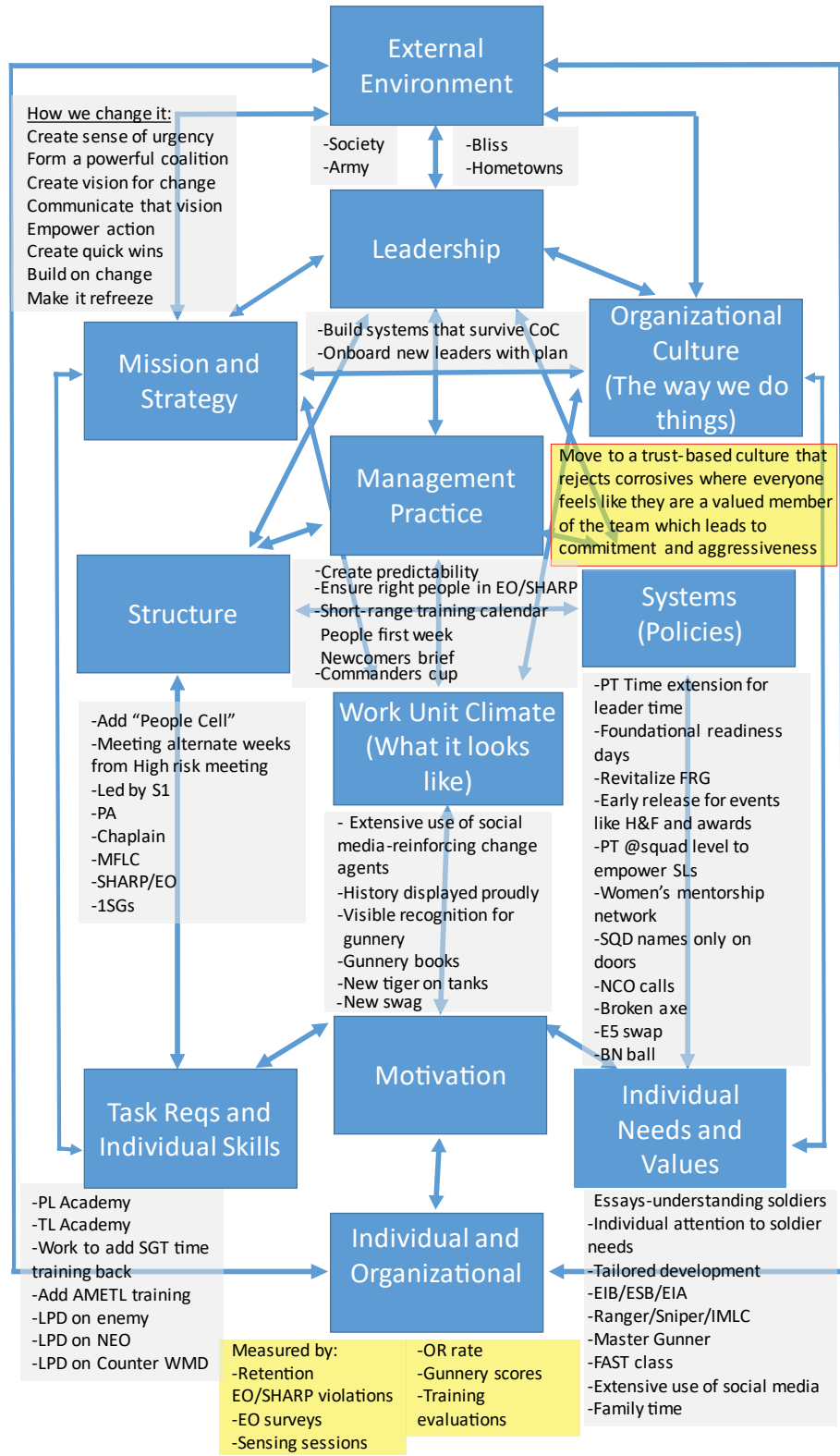
assumption in the organization was that we had so many things we had to do in such a short time that compliance was the norm rather than commitment. This manifested in satisficing behaviors and a continual string of short-term fixes that over time would degrade the unit performance. Soldiers were interested primarily in what they had to do so that they could be done with their day and go home, rather than working continuously to make themselves and the unit better every day. In choosing to move the culture toward commitment, I recognized we would have to contend with resistance from those who felt such actions were futile in the face of mounting external pressures from an environment in which armored brigade combat teams were in great demand globally. I also realized I would need a powerful coalition to help me lead the change in the organization to overcome that resistance. To that end, I asked the company commanders to work with their platoon sergeants to discuss what they wanted the culture to be and what could change in the transactional factors to help move us toward our desired culture.

Figure 2 (on page 72) is what the team came up with through numerous brainstorming sessions.

For *structure changes*, the team proposed creating a "people cell" to monitor change, and over time that transitioned into a weekly meeting we named the Tiger Lair. During that meeting, we brought together various resources including the military family life counselor, the chaplain, public affairs, a Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers representative, members of the battalion top five, and other influential leaders in the battalion on a rotating basis (e.g., first sergeants, influential platoon sergeants). We regularly checked on some of the indicators such as our high-risk soldiers but also focused on things we were working on for changes in the battalion. Building the Tiger Lair helped us allocate our most constrained resource, time, to help manage the change efforts across the battalion and monitor our progress.

Task requirements and individual skills/abilities in the Burke-Litwin model generally refer to the job/skills match of employees, whether they have the requisite knowledge and skills to effectively perform their

Changing the Steel Tiger's Culture

External Environment

How we change it:
Create sense of urgency
Form a powerful coalition
Create vision for change
Communicate that vision
Empower action
Create quick wins
Build on change
Make it refreeze

-Society
-Army
-Bliss
-Hometowns

Leadership

-Build systems that survive CoC
-Onboard new leaders with plan

Mission and Strategy

Organizational Culture (The way we do things)

Management Practice

Move to a trust-based culture that rejects corrosives where everyone feels like they are a valued member of the team which leads to commitment and aggressiveness

Structure

-Create predictability
-Ensure right people in EO/SHARP
-Short-range training calendar
People first week
Newcomers brief
-Commanders cup

Systems (Policies)

-Add "People Cell"
-Meeting alternate weeks from High risk meeting
-Led by S1
-PA
-Chaplain
-MFLC
-SHARP/EO
-1SGs

Work Unit Climate (What it looks like)

- Extensive use of social media-reinforcing change agents
-History displayed proudly
-Visible recognition for gunnery
-Gunnery books
-New tiger on tanks
-New swag

-PT Time extension for leader time
-Foundational readiness days
-Revitalize FRG
-Early release for events like H&F and awards
-PT @squad level to empower SLs
-Women's mentorship network
-SQD names only on doors
-NCO calls
-Broken axe
-E5 swap
-BN ball

Motivation

Task Reqs and Individual Skills

Individual Needs and Values

-PL Academy
-TL Academy
-Work to add SGT time training back
-Add AMETL training
-LPD on enemy
-LPD on NEO
-LPD on Counter WMD

Individual and Organizational

Measured by:
-Retention
EO/SHARP violations
-EO surveys
-Sensing sessions

-OR rate
-Gunnery scores
-Training evaluations

Essays-understanding soldiers
-Individual attention to soldier needs
-Tailored development
-EIB/ESB/EIA
-Ranger/Sniper/IMLC
-Master Gunner
-FAST class
-Extensive use of social media
-Family time

(Figure adapted by author from W. Warner Burke, *Organizational Change: Theory and Practice* [2011])

Figure 2. Steel Tiger Cultural Change through the Burke-Litwin Model

required jobs. We recognized several gaps that needed to be filled with the education of those leaders either new to the formation or new to important positions. We implemented biannual team leader academies and LT (lieutenant) academies to help those young leaders learn the skills to be able to perform their jobs. We also recognized we had several leader professional development (LPD) sessions we needed to conduct to get the formation ready to perform the specific tasks we would potentially be asked to execute while deployed to Korea. And lastly, we recognized we needed to provide dedicated time for our NCOs to train their soldiers on basic military occupational specialty skills, whether that was our personal soldiers or our tankers. Our time in Korea allowed us to do just that as 2nd Infantry Division maintains a sergeant's time training block in their division battle rhythm. When we returned from Korea to Fort Bliss, Texas, there was not a protected battle rhythm time for sergeant's time as the leadership explained it expected sergeants to be continuously training their soldiers, not just on Thursdays. Based on that, we adjusted by working with our younger NCOs to ensure they had available time in the weekly schedule, they understood the priorities for training, and they had the right assets to work on the fundamentals such as training for gunnery skills testing.

Management practices are the things managers do in the normal course of events to use the materials and people available to accomplish the organization's strategy. One of the biggest complaints from both the family readiness group and our soldiers was a lack of predictability. While some lack of predictability can be created by higher-level headquarters' last-minute taskings, leaders at every echelon must do everything that they can to mitigate friction through systems and proactive communication. To help with that, we made several adjustments. We extended the time of physical training by fifteen minutes to allow a specific time for squad leaders to discuss upcoming events with their soldiers, and produced a revised short-range training calendar to ensure that leaders at all echelons understood exactly what they were expected to do daily. We intentionally put focus on our battalion newcomers briefs, where the command sergeant major and I would personally meet every soldier and would discuss our culture. Introducing new members into the culture and explaining what we stood for and how the battalion works was an effective

bridge into the unit. It helped frame the initial interactions the soldiers had in the unit, and if the actions of the unit met the expectations we created in the newcomers brief, we were able to quickly integrate the soldiers into the culture. We also had long discussions about who should be in positions of trust in our SHARP (Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention) and Equal Opportunity programs; we chose those who were already demonstrated informal leaders the soldiers were already comfortable talking with.

Climate of the organization is the visible artifacts and what it feels like to be in the organization. We decided we needed to do some additional "branding" for the battalion, creating new unit T-shirts and unit "swag" that would appeal to the younger generation. We also worked to visibly mark our vehicles with a tiger so they could be recognized at a distance. We were lucky our command sergeant major was an artist, and he designed an emblem that had both a tiger head and an axe with blood dripping off it (based on our motto, "Blood on the axe!"). The branding was also extended to the company level, as each company designed their own crests and started to produce company coins, T-shirts, and stickers.

We discussed that while we wanted to lower dissatisfaction, we wanted to increase satisfaction. This was based on the work by Frederick Herzberg with his hygiene motivation theory, sometimes called two-factor theory. Herzberg showed the scales of dissatisfaction and satisfaction are not connected. There are what he called hygiene factors that reduced dissatisfaction (food, shelter, safety, money), and then there were motivational factors that increased satisfaction (membership in a high-performing team, feeling a part of something bigger than oneself, feeling the amount of work put in results in a corresponding good outcome).[7] To that end, we scheduled events to help with those feelings of belonging to include commanders' cups (competitive events to compete for an axe trophy), a battalion ball, and other fun events like our broken axe ceremony (where we tell stories of the funny things people have done). We also instituted a women's mentorship program, built a lactation room, and adopted the 1st Armored Division foundational readiness days to demonstrate to all members of the formation they are valued members of our team. 1st Armored Division foundational readiness days were held one day per

month with specific discussions about corrosive behaviors and how to mitigate them across the formation.

We also recognized that our population of mostly eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds have predominantly transitioned to the stage of adult development where they get their self-worth primarily from the view of others and no longer get their self-worth from the approval of their parents.[8] We recognized that in the current generation, approval from others comes primarily through social media. While many of the older generation used Facebook, which the battalion had already established, the younger generation operated primarily on Instagram, so we established an Instagram account, and we used it to support the change effort. We found for many of the soldiers that being on Instagram and getting likes was almost as powerful of a recognition as receiving a battalion coin. We also looked for ways to proudly display our unit history throughout the headquarters to tie the soldiers back to the unit's past.

Our chaplain developed a series of "hero" workouts that were dedicated to soldiers from the battalion who fell in battle. He reached out to some of the family members of the fallen soldiers to better understand their stories and get photos, which were discussed and displayed during the workouts. We further wanted to reinforce the lethality of the battalion and focused on reinforcing the importance of gunnery by making gunnery books for the crews who qualified distinguished, superior, or Q1 to sign in to be kept as a part of the unit history. We made the victory meal of steaks at gunnery as big as possible, with the leadership serving the soldiers. We also built a giant axe to mount on the battalion's top tank as a trophy. We made all these changes to increase both the fun and competitiveness in the battalion to make it a place where people were excited to go to work.

Lastly but very importantly, we focused on addressing the *individual needs and values* of the soldiers and leaders. We recognized if we wanted people to be valued, we had to be willing to ask them what they wanted, not just in the Army, but in life, and leaders needed to take tangible steps to help them get there. That meant we needed to put the welfare of soldiers above that of the unit at times and assume some short-term risk to maximize the gain for the greater Army.

We intentionally took some of those risks in the battalion, pushing for a young second lieutenant to get accepted into the fully funded legal education program to become a lawyer, working to get our medical officer accepted into the program to become a medical evacuation pilot, and sending our chaplain to Ranger School so he could potentially later in his career serve in the Ranger Regiment or other organizations. All these actions created gaps for the unit but demonstrated we cared about what our soldiers wanted to do in their lives.

We made getting an Expert Infantryman Badge and Expert Soldier Badge training and evaluation a priority for the unit. This is a difficult task in the current armored brigade combat team operating tempo but an important opportunity for our infantry soldiers and others to advance their careers. Obviously, each of these actions had to be evaluated for risk to the unit, but we made the conscious decision to accept more risk than other units, and this was noticed by our soldiers. We conducted Ranger School assessments and then used the results of these assessments to justify sending more soldiers and leaders to specialty schools such as Sniper School and Ranger School. All these things changed the artifact level of culture to help us begin to change the espoused values and underlying assumptions of the unit.

Enacting Change

Once a team has decided what needs to change in the organization, the next step is planning to enact the change. Change in organizations doesn't usually follow a linear pattern; rather, it follows what is termed to be punctuated equilibrium, meaning there are two general states during a change effort: stasis and dramatic change.[9] When leading change, it is important to understand that while the predominant theories of enacting change appear to be linear, the leader must be ready for periods of time when the organization seems to be standing still with respect to change—or even sliding backward due to events outside of the leader's control. One of the most popular methods for enacting change in organizations is the Kotter model; it can prove effective if managed over time. John Kotter's eight-stage process of creating a major change, as detailed in *Leading Change* and later works, can be summarized as follows:
(1) Establishing a sense of urgency
(2) Creating the guiding coalition

(3) Developing a vision and strategy

(4) Communicating the change vision

(5) Empowering broad-based change

(6) Generating short-term wins

(7) Consolidating gains and producing more change

(8) Anchoring new approaches in the culture[10]

Julien Pollack and Rachel Pollack found validity in the Kotter model through their research but discovered that to be most effective it must be more nuanced, requiring a more participative process and potential need for iterations in the change process to get to the end-state goal.[11] In an attempt at culture change in 1-77 AR, we followed the suggestions of Pollack and Pollack, and we established multiple groups in the guiding coalition first. The command sergeant major, the company commanders, and I did some initial brainstorming, and then the commanders sat down with their platoon sergeants and platoon leaders to discuss the Burke-Litwin model and recommend any additional changes.

After a couple of the initial changes to the system, we observed the effects and convened some of the more influential informal leaders in the organization to discuss the effects and recommend any additional changes. That group was composed of staff sergeants and sergeants first class who had been in the organization for a longer period, and they were the leaders the company commanders and first sergeants saw as NCOs who had reverent power in the organization. The staff sergeant and sergeant first class leaders, because of the number of daily interactions they had with soldiers, had both a uniquely clear perspective on the costs of the change at the lowest echelon as well as an ability to reinforce the change through their daily interactions. By engaging those leaders, we were able to create the case for change and communicate it to the soldier level; the commanders and I were able to reinforce it at our levels, but the power of the message was greatest when it came from those NCOs who the soldiers trusted.

To create our vision, we went through a series of five leader development programs based on the book *Culture Code* by Daniel Coyle, many of which had to be held virtually due to COVID but culminated in two sessions where we sat with the large group and discussed what we wanted the culture to be. After many iterations, we came to a two-sentence statement: "Welcome to the Steel Tigers, we put the Blood on the Axe. We fight to win, and it takes EVERYONE

to punch the enemy in the face and keep attacking." While that statement will not work for every unit in the Army, it perfectly captured what we wanted in our combined arms battalion. We emphasized we are an organization that is uniquely capable of getting into a fight with a significant force and continuing to attack if everyone in the organization did their part. As we talked in the group, we specifically focused on the fact that if our tanks ran out of fuel or our mechanics didn't have parts, we would fail in our duty to the Nation. That then led directly to the conversation about the counterproductive issues of sexual assault, racism, and extremism and the deleterious effect they would have on our ability to accomplish our mission. The statement became an anchor for the change we wanted, and we tried to communicate it as often as possible at echelon.

By communicating our message and empowering our leaders at all levels to use the phrase "that is not how we do things here," we gave the change effort power and emboldened even the lowest-level leaders to make needed changes. The power in the phrase came from the fact that the person saying it was part of the "we" and was showing the person who was not doing the right thing they were in the outgroup. As already discussed, with the age group of soldiers, that powerful peer pressure element added strength to the actions of the soldier or leader making the correction.

Our short-term wins came both in training, as the battalion was able to produce great results at gunnery and at the National Training Center, and in the barracks, where we had four separate instances of attempted suicide that were stopped by intervention by young, enlisted soldiers and two incidents that could have resulted in sexual assault that were similarly stopped. Each of those events was highlighted and reinforced as the soldiers were held up as positive examples, which helped to build on the change efforts. As the change efforts began to take hold, similarly sized units in our brigade experienced much higher levels of both sexual assault and suicide, while our battalion maintained very low levels of self-harm and sexual assault and did not have a suicide completed in over two years. While we had the goal of reducing those harmful behaviors to zero instances, the comparison to other units under the same stresses demonstrated that we were making progress.

Consolidating gains and creating more change is a difficult proposition at the battalion level as the traditional permanent change of station cycles mean a unit will lose between 30 and 50 percent of personnel each year. I did not fully appreciate the impact the high level of leader and soldier turnover would have on the organizational change effort until I began to feel the culture backslide. Our battalion changed out all but one company commander and one first sergeant as well as the executive officer, S-3, and command sergeant major in a two-month period, and we changed most of our platoon leaders and 45 percent of the platoon sergeants. I found that I had to be intentionally clear and repetitive with my messaging that could easily translate to the soldier level. Our culture statement provided me and the subordinate leaders with the message, and while at times I felt like I was repeating myself, it took several months and many engagements before I began to hear soldiers utilizing the same messages in conversation with each other. With the large changeover, we found we had to reinvigorate the LPD programs, and I had to be intentional with my initial counselings to reinforce the messaging associated with the change effort.

Immediately after the changeover of the large number of leaders, our battalion began a rotation to Korea, which afforded us the opportunity to have more engagement with our leaders as there was not as high of a pressure to balance family activities. We were able to create additional events to continue to build the culture with a brown bag lunch series with rotating groups of leaders (e.g., platoon leaders, executive officers, first sergeants) and additional opportunities for competition and engagement such as our commanders' cup events, broken axe awards, and intramural sports. By the end of our nine-month rotation, the culture had stabilized again, but I didn't anticipate the challenge that would come from redeployment and an additional COVID lockdown. As we were beginning the redeployment, a surge in COVID cases in Korea meant we had to have nearly the entire battalion on lockdown for two weeks, and we were limited for almost six weeks on how much in-person interaction we could have to minimize the chances of an outbreak affecting the relief in place with the next unit. This lockdown had an increased effect on the battalion because the battalion had gotten so accustomed to the family environment our culture was seeking to create. We had an uptick in suicidal ideations that was compounded by the dispersal of our personnel as we began the redeployment process and block leave.
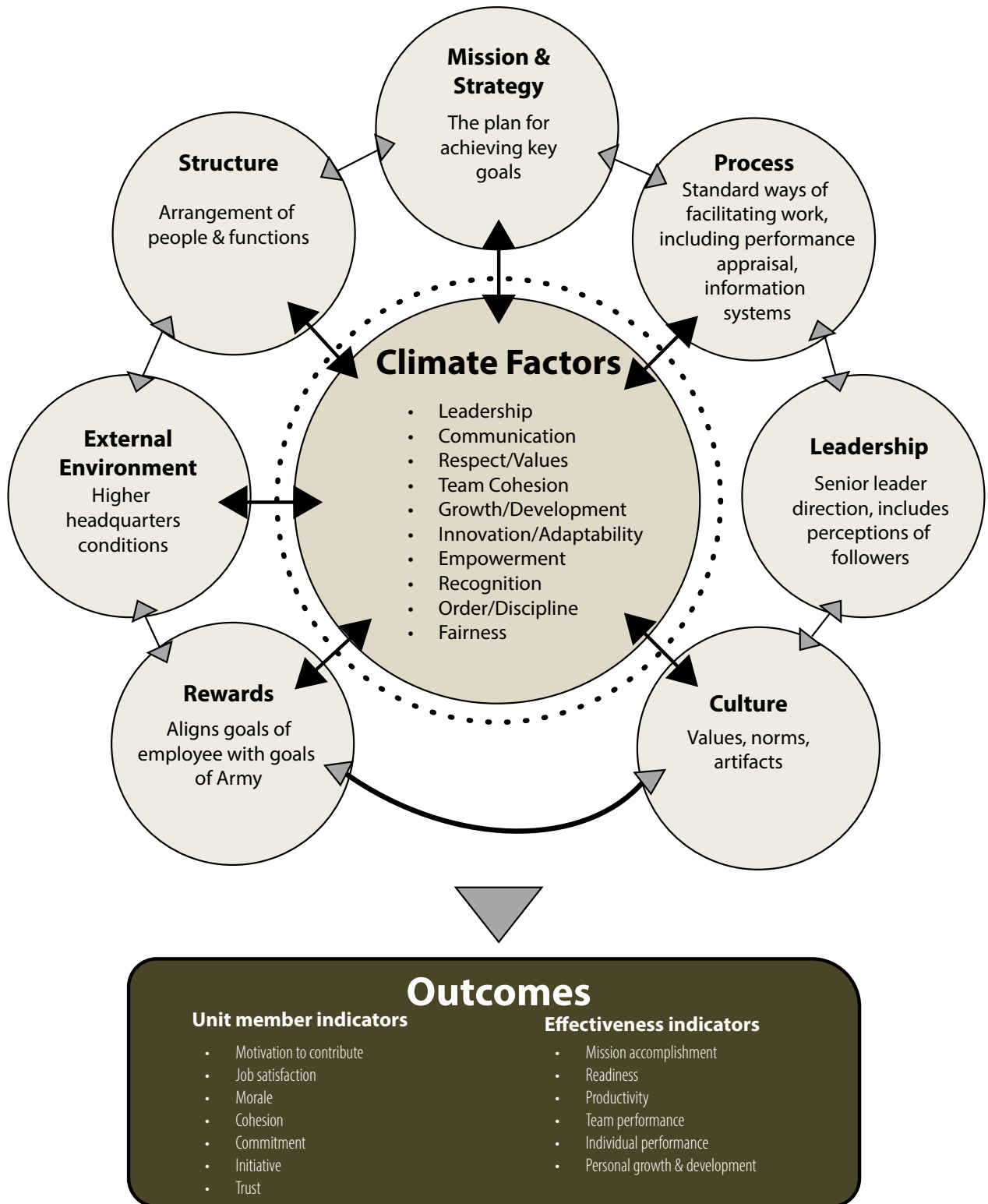
Those changes to the external environment and our daily processes meant we didn't have as much daily interaction to reinforce the culture and the battalion struggled a bit with some issues both in terms of behavioral health and indiscipline as we returned home and began to integrate our rear detachment personnel. The battalion then undertook a series of events culminating with our battalion ball, which helped bring the culture back into line prior to the next summer permanent-change-of-station cycle. Consolidating our gains was perhaps the most difficult part of the change effort, and we did not make as much progress as we would have liked, but the overall trend remained positive. Kurt Lewin states that the process of change is unfreeze-change-refreeze, and while we did well in the first two parts of that process, we were not as successful in the final portion.[12] We did our best to continue many of the comradery-building events such as traditional hail and farewells, and when the environment did not allow them in person, we continued them using virtual means, but it did not have the same magnitude of effects and resulted in a punctuated equilibrium of change as we went through the process.

Through the work of the Center for the Army Profession and Leadership, the Army has started to add similar concepts to the Burke-Litwin model into Army publications such as the *Building and Maintaining a Positive Climate Handbook,* which uses a similar model (see figure 3, page 77) to demonstrate the factors that affect a unit's climate.[13]

The Center for the Army Profession and Leadership handbook is directed predominantly at company level leaders with vignettes and a similar model, as well as the recommendation to utilize the Kotter model for implementing change. The use of this resource in conjunction with a battalion-level or higher change effort will give organization leaders the tools to help communicate the purpose and direction of their change efforts to the leaders of their formations and will provide additional resources for LPDs and discussions with leaders.

What We Did Not Do Well

In any major effort, soldiers must be self-reflective to learn from it, and as an organization, there were

Mission & Strategy

The plan for achieving key goals

Structure

Arrangement of people & functions

Process
Standard ways of facilitating work, including performance appraisal, information systems

Climate Factors

- Leadership
- Communication
- Respect/Values
- Team Cohesion
- Growth/Development
- Innovation/Adaptability
- Empowerment
- Recognition
- Order/Discipline
- Fairness

External Environment
Higher headquarters conditions

Leadership
Senior leader direction, includes perceptions of followers

Rewards
Aligns goals of employee with goals of Army

Culture
Values, norms, artifacts

Outcomes

Unit member indicators

- Motivation to contribute
- Job satisfaction
- Morale
- Cohesion
- Commitment
- Initiative
- Trust

Effectiveness indicators

- Mission accomplishment
- Readiness
- Productivity
- Team performance
- Individual performance
- Personal growth & development

*(Figure from the Center for the Army Profession and Leadership, *Building and Maintaining a Positive Climate Handbook* [2020])*

Figure 3. Factors that Contribute to Climate

things we tried that did not go well through the process. First, I regrettably took a long time to work with the team to finalize our culture; I wanted the process to be participative, but it took too long for us to fully flesh out our culture. That meant that for the first several months, we were changing but without a defined end state. While we were making small changes to the climate, we were at risk of creating friction by making changes for the sake of change. Not having the fully defined culture also limited the ability of lower-level leaders to make changes at their level using disciplined initiative enable through understanding the end state.

Looking back, we did not do a great job of marketing our change; we did not put together banners and other artifacts talking about why it was different and pushing the change forward. In retrospect, we would have likely increased the pace of change if we matched the word-of-mouth efforts from the leaders at echelon with visual aids to help the process, both in the office spaces and the digital world. We made some of the changes without fully communicating the purpose. For example, we instituted an additional fifteen minutes of physical training time to allow leaders to talk with

soldiers about upcoming events to create more predictability but did not communicate the purpose well. That led to squad leaders initially just conducting longer physical training sessions and not having the necessary discussions with their soldiers. To aid in our communications efforts, I also should have provided every new soldier with a copy of our culture statement in our monthly welcome briefs.

We also did not acknowledge and integrate some of the resources that were already there. Particularly, as we instituted a women's mentorship program, we did not tie into the existing Army-wide and national-level assets that could have increased the efficacy and excitement around the program.

Finally, we were reactive when understanding the potential effects of the external environment on our culture and our change efforts. If we had taken more time to understand how potential changes in the environment external to the battalion would affect the changes we were implementing and intentionally included in our plan opportunities to reframe the problem, we might have found better solutions to keep the change effort on track and reduced the amount of time the culture was either in stasis or backsliding.

Members of 1st Battalion, 77th Armored Regiment, compete in a hot dog eating competition (a Commanders Cup event) on 11 December 2020. The photo shows soldiers from our HHC, A Company, and C Company competing and having fun. (Photo by author)

Conclusion

Changing any organization is hard, but it is also incredibly important, and the Army efforts at change to meet the objectives of the "People First" initiatives are aiming at the right targets. However, at the battalion level, each organization must examine itself critically to understand what needs to be altered to get to the culture that is desired. The Burke-Litwin model is a valuable tool to help leaders understand their organization and what can be done to make it better. Utilizing the Kotter model can help those leaders see a path to success. The result of our change was demonstrated in the words of the soldiers and leaders leaving the organization; at hail and farewells, the consistent theme was that the battalion was a special place, a place where people truly care about each other. People spoke about the feeling of being in the organization—it was truly a family, one that was inclusive and that they wanted to create in their next units. We also consistently heard the same thing from soldiers coming into the brigade, asking to come to the battalion because everyone they talked to said it was a great unit, one they wanted to join.

This culture change effort and the use of the Burke-Litwin model could be scaled up to a brigade level, but it may be more difficult as the types of units vary so greatly across a brigade combat team (BCT). At a BCT level, it may be more functional to have each of the battalions conduct its own assessment and then examine what can be done at the BCT level to support its efforts. For functional brigades such as sustainment, military intelligence, field artillery, or aviation, conducting this as a brigade level would likely be more effective than in a traditional BCT due to the commonalities of some of the units and the individuals therein.

Creating units with the type of culture that makes people want to be there and willingly tell their friends about has impacts beyond the unit. Those type of interactions are the ones that encourage soldiers to reenlist and cause young soldiers to spread positive opinions about the Army, which has a trickle-down effect into both recruiting and retention. This article may be about how to change the culture in a battalion, but the potential effects for the Army are much greater if multiplied across the force. ■

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