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The issue of suicide is “emotional, painful, and complicated,” as President Obama put it in a speech during August 2011 in announcing that he would extend official condolences to the families of military personnel who kill themselves. Army Capt. D.J. Skelton was among the dissenting voices on the issue. Skelton lost his left eye and the use of his left arm after an RPG attack in Fallujah, Iraq.

(Photo by Fred Baker, Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs)

Leveraging the Power of Loyal Dissent in the U.S. Army

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Loyal dissent is usually expressed as carefully thought-out, well-intentioned, usually verbal action designed to help an entire organization or a particular leader perform better and accomplish

its mission more successfully. Loyal dissent presents a leader with an alternate idea or a different solution to a problem, sometimes even after a leader has issued orders or made his or her decision. Truly loyal dissent

does not consist of continuous second-guessing, and it is never self-serving. Complaining is not loyal dissent, and real loyal dissent is not about a subordinate's fear of change. It is about the good of the organization and expressed out of genuine concern for the leaders.

Telling the Difference

Both loyal and disloyal dissent are present to varying degrees inside every Army organization all the time. Both will naturally occur in military organizations whether we acknowledge it or not, but their existence does not mean an organization is broken or badly led.¹ On the contrary, the presence of dissent is inevitable because it is a normal human reaction to frustration even among highly disciplined soldiers.

Sometimes dissent occurs as a result of the actions of a toxic leader, or adverse working conditions where members perceive little is being done by leadership to remediate or assist them. The majority of dissent in our formations, when it occurs, is not valuable loyal dissent. It is usually the unproductive type and comes in the form of a subordinate's parochial resistance to authority or change along with some cases of outright disobedience.² Unproductive dissent commonly occurs because some percentage of our subordinates fear change or are just selfish and seek a way to resist losing their position, privileges, time, or comforts. Most successful Army leaders have dealt with and overcome such negative challenges from time to time through legal exercise of authority.

Loyal dissent, however, is markedly different and we should learn to harness it to our advantage. Expressing loyal dissent is risky to a soldier's career as it potentially carries with it the penalty of estrangement from the leader he or she cares about and ostracism by one's peers.³ Therefore, loyal dissent is not expressed by selfish subordinates or those adverse to change. Instead, it is selflessly undertaken by people who care deeply about their organization's purpose, its mission, and who want to help their leaders. Moreover, it is undertaken by subordinates who have a measure of moral courage, are emotionally committed to the unit's success, and are perhaps concerned the organization may be heading in the wrong direction. In expressing loyal dissent, they have overcome their fear of becoming a lone dissenting voice because they are fiercely loyal to the unit's purpose and also to their leader. Those who undertake

this loyal and productive form of dissent may be among those who truly care most for their organization. In addition, these solution-oriented individuals often have already earned positions of trust and responsibility with access and close proximity to their decision makers.⁴

The dissent of subordinates who fit the profile of loyal dissenters should be leveraged to a leader's advantage, not simply counteracted like its unproductive opposite. As leaders, we should pause for a moment to determine the nature of the dissent within our ranks. Loyal dissent is valuable. These dissenters are a valuable resource available to Army organizations and leaders because their contributions can help make their units more efficient and potentially save leaders from making mistakes that could lead to their own downfall or embarrass the organization.⁵ Therefore, these individuals should be of special interest to smart military leaders because they can be leveraged for their talents, ideas, and dedication to make the organization better and their superiors even more successful.

Why Some Subordinates Undertake Loyal Dissent

When subordinates perceive an organization is in decline, the late Harvard professor and Army veteran A.O. Hirshman described them as having three choices. They could quit, which is not really an immediate possibility for most soldiers in the Army. Next they could outwardly feign loyalty while waiting quietly for conditions to improve, which deprives both the organization and its leader of their advice. (We will call this *faking it*.) Finally, they can openly voice their dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in an effort to improve it.⁶ This final alternative, loyal dissenters have concluded, is a far better alternative than quitting or faking it, which does not contribute to the unit's success or immediate improvement.

Distinguishing Loyal from Unproductive Dissent

There is a danger that leaders will conflate loyal dissent with its opposite. Unproductive dissent is frequently manifest when subordinates merely complain unproductively, as when they believe an organization is in decline, or on the wrong path, without any intent or will to do something about it. Some, of course, can

be expected to be lazy and never fully contribute no matter what decision a leader has made. (Let us again assume these types of subordinates must be dealt with using legitimate authority in ways outside the scope of this article.) However, when leaders confuse unproductive dissent with genuine loyal dissent, and lump both together, their followers will become ingratiating and obsequious. Worse still, those subordinates with the potential to make significant contributions to the unit by supplying creative and perceptive contrary views may decide to simply wait out their leader's tour, electing to contribute in a minimal way in order to avoid attention, and hoping that somehow things will improve due to other external factors.⁷ Such a circumstance denies the unit the energy and potential contributions to mission success these soldiers could provide.

Consequently, treating all dissent as adverse is wrong-headed and highly counterproductive. Instead, successful leaders are often those most willing to provide a real and productive forum to leverage the value of loyal dissent.

Evaluating the Nature of Dissent

To discern the difference between valuable loyal dissent and its opposite, consider the source. Loyal dissenters are generally hard working with a proven track record, not complainers who seldom contribute their full potential.

Next, consider their motivation. If resolution of the dissent provides the dissenter with no personal gain, or risks a leader's disfavor by bringing up a controversial issue, then the reputed loyal dissenter is likely motivated by good intentions or acting for the good of the unit.

Finally, consider the dissenting idea itself. Could it potentially improve your organization? Even if the idea cannot be implemented right now, would future similar ideas from others potentially help your team? If so, consider giving it a chance.

If the dissent passes this three-part test then it is likely loyal in nature. Leaders must then carefully decide how they react to loyal dissent, as everyone in their organization is now watching.

The Challenges to Accepting Loyal Dissent

To employ our subordinates to the organization's full advantage, we must encourage them to speak freely

when appropriate. Loyal dissenting subordinates are not a threat. However, leaders sometimes have a tough time differentiating between challenges to their personal authority—which is not the intent of truly loyal dissent—and challenges to their ideas or policies.⁸ A subordinate can disagree with a policy, and bring you a solution or new recommendation, without challenging your right to lead.

Human Context of Dissent

Even loyal dissent may tax our deeply entrenched human aversion and cultural conditioning against challenges to the hierarchy without our even knowing it, leaving both the would-be dissenter and the dominant leader feeling uneasy. This occurs despite the fact the leader may have actually requested that his or her subordinate provide a respectful critique (i.e., "Tell me what you really think"). Overcoming these uneasy feelings that result from productive dissent first requires us to understand their origins and then have the courage and strength to mitigate their stifling effects.

Some resistance to hearing loyal dissent may come from our biological roots. Psychologist and education expert Dr. Howard Gardner argues that, as primates, we are hard wired to seek out hierarchical organizations and then imitate and follow the dominate leaders.⁹ This has been a good thing for society overall as it has allowed us to create great civilizations ordered by the rule of law. However, the biological legacy that creates deference to hierarchy may also mean that we are all internally wired to avoid loyal dissent when facing uncertainty and stress.

This aversion is especially apparent among newly formed groups, which characteristically have higher rates of anxiety about their chances for success stemming from their unproven track record. In the Army, new groups are formed and reformed regularly. A battalion or brigade recently reconstituted as part of the Army force generation cycle contains mostly new soldiers and must make ready for combat in short order. These new teams are particularly vulnerable to bottling up loyal and productive dissent.

To reduce anxiety, new groups like these tend to become more homogeneous in thought as a coping mechanism. This may successfully reduce some anxiety, but also disrupts aggregate creativity and dissuades all dissent, both loyal and disloyal.¹⁰ A similar

challenge to the acceptance of loyal dissent occurs when we overvalue harmony inside our organizations. Psychologist and long-time intelligence community researcher J. Richard Hackman has found that “teams whose members share good feelings and a spirit of camaraderie run the risk of groupthink. Dissenting views about what the group is doing may be ignored or squelched—or even self-censored by worried members who do not want to spoil things by raising questions.”¹¹

The tendency to groupthink stems from the natural desire of military organizations to minimize internal conflict. We cannot help it. A smoothly running unit is generally considered to be indicative of an effective and cohesive atmosphere. However, the problem with things running too smoothly, as Harvard professor Ronald Heifetz points out, is that “differences in perspective are the engine of human progress.”¹² Loyal dissent provides leaders with this difference in perspective, and that can be quite helpful to our bosses.

Hackman goes on to argue that, while dissenting views may make some members feel uncomfortable, these views are useful because they generate new ideas and creative approaches to problems when harnessed properly. Such new ideas and creative approaches lead to successful winning organizations. Leaders can mistakenly attribute success directly to a unit’s level of cohesion, when in fact unit cohesion is really a result of a unit’s successes.¹³ Winning breeds cohesion in a locker room, but cohesion does not always lead to victory. In contrast, loyal dissent can help lead to success by promoting useful innovation; success that then contributes to unit cohesion at all levels.

Setting the Conditions for Loyal Dissent in Your Unit

Loyal dissent does not undermine our leaders; its purpose is to support them and help them make better decisions. Therefore, a leader may need to invest valuable time to teach his or her subordinates how to properly and productively dissent in the unit.

For their part, aspiring loyal dissenters understand that dissent is risky for a variety of reasons; therefore will not be undertaken lightly. Dissenting too often makes one a troublemaker, too seldom and you gain the title of *yes-man*. Nevertheless, good leaders will facilitate an avenue or mechanism to encourage loyal dissent

by setting conditions for it to occur properly and then leveraging it to their advantage.

Five Methods to Leverage Loyal Dissent in Your Formation

First, leaders who wish to harness loyal dissent must look within themselves and determine what kind of command climate they really wish to establish. They have to decide for themselves what role they expect their subordinates to play.

Subordinates who are conditioned to believe they serve only the leader’s interests will rarely let that leader hear anything but praise. In such an environment, leaders will tolerate very little loyal dissent and subordinates understand that they only exist to carry out the leader’s explicit directives and wishes.¹⁴ Very few of us desire this type of organization.

In contrast, in an environment where subordinates are taught that they exist to help the leader successfully lead and help collectively to achieve the organization’s purpose, respectful challenges to the leader’s ideas from time to time may actually be a welcome addition to the process. Good leaders demand that subordinates provide this dissent even though the process may be somewhat uncomfortable for both parties.

Moreover, to make the process work, good leaders must learn to separate the idea from the person delivering it. While professionals must endeavor to speak clearly, calmly, and succinctly to their leaders, we must all remember that loyal dissent can be scary for even the most accomplished subordinates, and allowances must be made for inexperience and insecurity. It is not easy to offer a new idea to the boss, especially when he or she may not want to hear it right away.

It is also important to bear in mind that the dissenting soldier may be quite nervous and insecure of their status immediately following the expression of loyal dissent. As a result, the loyal dissenter may overcompensate for this insecurity by acting loud, scared, or boisterous.¹⁵ Consequently, the dissenting soldier may have a tone that the leader finds troubling, or the person may inadvertently make the leader angry.

We all have a normal, natural tendency to attempt to avoid criticism. However, good leaders must learn to master this emotion, overriding their natural fear of constructive criticism from juniors and appearing



Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates speaks to a group of 84 senior cadets majoring in Advanced National Security Studies at the United States Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., 21 April 2008. Gates remarked, "I should note that during my time as secretary, I have been impressed by the way the Army's professional journals allow some of our brightest and most innovative officers to critique—sometimes bluntly—the way the service does business; to include judgments about senior leadership, both military and civilian. I believe this is a sign of institutional vitality and health and strength. I encourage you to take on the mantle of fearless, thoughtful, but loyal dissent when the situation calls for it. And agree with the articles or not, senior officers should embrace such dissent as healthy dialogue and protect and advance those considerably more junior who are taking on that mantle."

(Photo by Cherie Cullen, Department of Defense)

generally interested in their respectfully dissenting opinions. If this does not happen, the process will quickly become counterproductive as leaders react poorly to it and send clear non-verbal signals that they do not really like it, no matter if their words indicate to the contrary.

Next, leaders must act in some way on the loyal dissent their subordinates provide them. A leader must take some minimal action, even if he or she chooses not to implement the suggested change or modify the suggested policy. Acknowledging the dissent is enough, or telling the subordinate that you will consider his or her proposal.

In contrast, taking no action at all sends a clear signal, not only to the loyal dissenter who has had the temerity to approach his or her boss, but to all those in the unit who are watching. By taking no action, a leader is communicating that he or she is not really serious about any commitment to consideration of dissenting opinions and may even be disingenuous by feigning that he or she is so, undermining leader credibility.

If the leader chooses not to adopt a suggestion, he or she should still provide the loyally dissenting subordinate feedback on his or her idea. Tell the subordinate why you do not want to act on their advice, when the time is appropriate. When leaders act on loyal dissent, even if they only acknowledge its receipt and commend the subordinate for providing it, they increase their reputation as fair and open-minded.¹⁶ Consider the courage a subordinate must have to muster to tell a commander, respectfully, that the unit is off course. When leaders respectfully acknowledge this loyal dissent, and especially when they implement prudent ideas from subordinates, this follow-up can dramatically increase the loyalty and commitment of every soldier. Additionally, recommendations by loyal dissenters that are actually implemented serve to empower subordinates and engender deeper individual commitment and unit cohesion without undermining essential unit discipline.

Third, leaders must adjust the unit's on-boarding experiences to encourage loyal dissent. It is during the on-boarding process that new soldiers are taught the "correct way to perceive, think, act, and feel," while learning the unit's culture and norms.¹⁷ During this phase, leaders must explain to their subordinates how to successfully and loyally dissent, when to speak up, and how to best do it in their formation. Group norms taught during on-boarding experiences are used to foster collaboration and assist the leader in getting the most out of his or her team.¹⁸ During this on-boarding period, leaders must also help subordinates understand when it is appropriate to simply remain silent. In this way, we leverage loyal dissent at all levels, demonstrating that it is not just the purview of senior officers and NCOs.

Taking steps to institutionalize the process demonstrates that loyal dissent, undertaken at the appropriate time, is not inconsistent with good military discipline and actually supports the chain-of-command. When properly executed, it is the epitome of good followership and demonstrates true loyalty to our leaders. A unit's norms relative to loyal dissent promulgated during the on-boarding experience can set conditions for success with far reaching effects.

Fourth, leaders must institutionalize real loyal dissent mechanisms and other rituals in their organizations.¹⁹ There is no need to gripe behind the boss's back when you can, and should, speak directly to the leader's face. Leaders who take active measures to formally institutionalize loyal dissent mechanisms create conditions to get the most from their loyal subordinates and disrupt the influence of nonproductive dissenters.

The famous *open door policy* is just a start, but really only a passive measure. Absolutely everybody has an open door policy, and most require only that the leader sit and wait for subordinates to come to them. In contrast, private sector executive coach and author Ira Chaleff urges business leaders "not to mistake the fact that they have an open door policy with having one that functions."²⁰ He argues that leaders can determine if their open door policy is working well by counting the number of times subordinates from two or more levels down in their organization have actually used it. If the answer is zero or very seldom, then either there is no dissent present in the organization (which would be a real miracle) or something is preventing its effective use.²¹

Far better to employ dissent mechanisms that act as safety valves against the formation of negative dissent inside your unit.²² Leaders must actively and regularly seek out dissenting opinions to create these outlets, and this cannot be easily delegated. Asking subordinate commanders to express a dissenting opinion at the end of each briefing, regularly requiring three recommended 'improves' on unit policy from each subordinate, and blocking time on a leader's calendar for honest two-way counseling are all examples of ritualized active mechanisms for the communication of loyal dissent to leaders.

Former NASA administrator Sean O'Keefe implemented active dissent mechanisms in his organization, stating "my first rule is never to surround myself with people who are just like me. My second rule is always to insist upon someone voicing the dissenting opinion. Always."²³ Similarly, loyal dissent is not something our leaders must simply endure; it is something they must actively encourage to improve their organizations.

Finally, leaders must recognize and accept that not every loyally dissenting subordinate will get it right. Leaders must resist the natural temptation to rapidly dismiss the well-intentioned subordinate presenting an imperfect (or bad) idea, lest they inhibit all future loyal

dissent in the organization. Word travels quickly when the boss reacts badly to a challenging viewpoint. Truly leveraging loyal dissent in our units means leaders have to exhibit patience when listening to some subordinates whose ideas are not quite ready for implementation, or were formed without all the necessary facts.

This is not advocacy for leaders to needlessly suffer fools or set low standards. Loyal dissenters care greatly about their leader's opinion. When their proposal is off-base and the leader provides constructive and professional feedback as to why this is so, their behavior will become self-regulating very quickly. Loyal subordinates do not want to waste their leader's time with poorly conceived ideas that will not, or cannot, be enacted, but occasionally it is bound to occur.

Additionally, punishment of loyal dissent is self-defeating for leaders, as the organization will soon withdraw from providing any future input or advice and move toward self-preservation. Hackman's research has found that "punishment fosters either withdrawal or variation of behavior as people try to head off aversive outcomes."²⁴ Certainly there are some negative behaviors leaders must always discourage and others they must punish outright. Loyal dissent, however, cannot be one of them. If a leader signals that he or she will only listen to the good ideas presented by subordinates, very soon leaders will find himself themselves listening to no ideas at all.

Conclusion

The hybrid threats our Army faces require agile formations at all levels where leaders can harness good ideas from multiple sources. Loyal dissent empowers both leaders and subordinates alike to generate these ideas, and will make our military organizations more successful. When executed properly, leaders use loyal dissent to create the conditions for unit-level innovation by employing subordinates to their fullest potential. In an era of reduced budgets and personnel challenges, this is one way Army units must leverage smart soldiers who fiercely want to directly contribute to the success of the organization.

The Army must balance the need for synchronization with the requirement to innovate and conduct successful decentralized operations. With that in mind, there are some potential drawbacks to loyal dissent. Under certain circumstances, leaders pausing

to carefully consider dissenting opinions could potentially waste too much time at critical junctures and create some measure of inefficiency. This could potentially risk soldier's lives if undertaken at wholly inappropriate times or in the presence of an inappropriate audience (though such a deliberate pause might also save the unit from making a grave mistake). There is no substitute for a leader's judgment in these circumstances.

Consequently, it is essential to recognize that there is a time and place for open debate, a time for loyal dissent, and a time to rapidly execute orders without question. A leader's time is precious, and allowing every single subordinate to have his or her say whenever he or she chose would lead to anarchy.²⁵

Ethical and thoughtful subordinates must be taught to discern when such dissent is appropriate if they are to be trusted to loyally dissent to their leaders. They

will not get the timing right every time, but they must try hard to do so. To cultivate the process, leaders may consider selecting a few key subordinates who are encouraged to question the leader's ideas in a loyal way at most any time, while others are asked to do so only formally through formal dissent mechanisms.²⁶

The key to establishing an environment where loyal dissent is encouraged is remembering that subordinates are not attacking the leader's personal authority. They trust in your right to lead them but want to help you make a better decision. Loyal dissenting subordinates are attempting to help their leader and their organization succeed.

A command environment that invites disciplined, thoughtful, and well-intentioned loyal dissent increases soldier commitment, a leader's access to alternate solutions, and helps foster true unit cohesion and discipline. ■

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