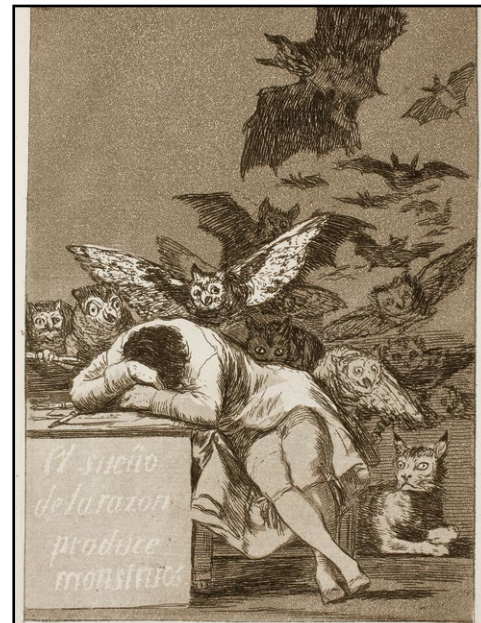


It's Not About Trust; It's About Thinking and Judgment



(Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

"The sleep of reason produces monsters,"
Caprichos, No. 43 in series (1799), Francisco Goya
(1746-1828).

Lt. Col. Joe Doty, Ph.D., U.S. Army,
Retired, and
Master Sgt. Jeff Fenlason, U.S. Army

There has been a great deal of talk about trust and trust development recently in and around the military. Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has made it one of his priorities for the joint force.¹ The issue of trust—or breach of trust—has surfaced because over the past decade or so, there have been numerous breaches throughout the force (to include flag-level officers), most notably with regard to sexual misconduct. Lying and cheating, along with other failures of service members of all ranks to conform to an acceptable standard of professional behavior, have also dominated the press and helped to weaken the trust our nation has in its armed forces. The Army professes that trust is the bedrock of the profession.² It identifies it as—

- Trust between soldiers
- Trust between soldiers and their leaders
- Trust between soldiers their families and the Army
- Trust between the Army and the American people

In response to this new focus on trust, we will attempt to investigate and dissect what trust really means

and what it looks like in practical and real terms. More importantly, we will propose that the training, educational, and developmental focus should not be on trust; it should instead be continuously focused on self-awareness, critical thinking, and judgment (or reasoning).

Trust

Soldiers gain trust by exhibiting high levels of competence and character.

Trust in competence. In day-to-day activities, soldiers primarily elicit competence-trust by being proficient in their military occupational duties—pilots, mechanics, clerks, snipers, divers, ammunition specialists, cooks, and medics are just a few examples.

Gaps or weaknesses in competence are relatively easy to see and can normally be remedied by extra training or practice. For example, if Spc. Smith, a mechanic, does not know how to fix a transmission, this is a competency gap. Smith's supervisor, Staff Sgt. Jones, can easily identify Smith's shortcoming and develop a training plan to remedy the deficiency.

Smith trusts that Jones will not have him fix a transmission until Smith can safely and properly complete the task. Unit leadership trusts that Jones will apply his expert knowledge and judgment (either conscious or unconscious) of Smith's abilities and train his subordinate accordingly. In this example, Jones demonstrates that competence-trust is the result of expert knowledge, critical thinking, and reasoning.

Trust in character. Issues of trust become much more complex when concerning character. Thinking, judging, and reasoning become even more necessary and discerning as they relate to character-trust.

Rightly or wrongly, character can be seen as being very malleable and situational. Person X can be trusted in one situation or context but might not be trusted in another. This idea will make many uncomfortable because the military is a profession, has a professional ethic, and ideally should not have leaders whose character is malleable, or situational, or susceptible to working outside of the accepted professional norm or ethic. True enough, but humans are humans—each is flawed and weak in certain areas.

History is rife with examples where common human weaknesses are exposed by sex, money, power, and alcohol or drugs. Those in the military are not immune from these temptations, but increasing our awareness (consciousness) of how we view these temptations and how we judge them will result in more thinking and judgment—which can only help to mitigate their effects.

The aforementioned temptations often result in what many would characterize as moral or ethical character flaws. However, how people both in and out of an organization view these flaws is a mixed bag—even in professions like the military. For many, lying about and having affairs are seen as private matters that have no effect on one's professional behavior or competence-trust.

Former President Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky appears to be a shining example of these conflicting points of view. Did Americans elect a president, expecting that person to be morally perfect and upstanding? Or, did they elect the person whom they believed would be the best chief executive and policy maker for the country?

Similarly, does the military select officers for flag-level command knowing their characters or assuming they possess the appropriate character traits

(knowing how flawed we all are)? Or, do we select military leaders because of their demonstrated capability to command at the levels for which they have been selected?

It is important to note here that we are not taking sides or subscribing to any specific behavioral ethics. We also are not challenging or questioning the military's professional ethic or the importance of upholding it. We are merely presenting real-world topics and issues that affect trust and trust building.

Thinking, judgment, and trust. In a given situation, personal morals and beliefs, as well as professional values and ethics, all work together to influence a person's thoughts and judgment—resulting in some level of trust in those involved. In order to move the conversation forward, we need to bring up some uncomfortable aspects of what trust is all about—how to gain it, how to lose it, and how it can (or cannot) be regained.

The case of Brig. Gen. Jeffrey Sinclair provides numerous examples of issues of trust, transparency, power, fraternization, sex, and professional ethics. Anecdotal evidence suggests that his extramarital activities were common knowledge, perhaps for years and years, in and around his units, but nothing was said or done. Why not? Is this a case of his unquestioned warrior and leadership competencies usurping and clouding the thinking and judgment of those serving in and around him? It seems likely. This appears to be a classic example of those who knew and served with Sinclair having unquestioned and complete trust in his competence and not spending any time considering or reasoning through their trust in his character.³

The spike of high-profile incidents over the past few years seems to suggest that other senior officers (for example, Gen. David Petraeus, Gen. Kip Ward, Gen. Kevin Byrnes, and Col. James Johnson who have gotten into trouble, also had the unqualified trust in their competence from their subordinates and peers while trust of character was rarely, if ever, questioned. And, if it was questioned, it was either dismissed or rationalized away. Of note, we acknowledge and understand the risk to a soldier's career if a soldier questioned or challenged a senior officer's character. Yet this cost-benefit analysis, and perhaps a professional discussion with others, is an example of the thinking, reasoning, judgment we are speaking to.

A reflective analysis of character-trust and competence-trust suggests one can trust people in some areas and not in others. In the military, one might trust someone to properly conduct an arms room inventory but not necessarily trust the person to safely run a range or to stay sober on a Friday night. Or, one might trust someone to properly conduct a tactical rehearsal and yet not trust the person to fairly and impartially write a counseling statement or fitness report. Examples of trusting someone in one area and not in another are infinite, and they highlight the variability associated with the concept of trust and, correspondingly, the importance of thinking, judgment, and reasoning.

Use of the word trust is fraught with the possibility of error and mistaken meaning. If one was to say “I trust Col. Brown,” what does that exactly mean? Is he trusted tactically? To keep his word? Does it mean to trust him to be fair in adjudicating punishment? To trust him to babysit one’s children? To trust him to not steal? To trust him to be on time? The potential list is endless. As such, when we use the word trust, we need to be specific about what we are talking about; we need context. To do that, we have to think, use our judgment and reason.

What should be clear now is that the questions are not really about Brown at all. Instead, they center on one’s interpretation of Brown, conceived by one’s thinking, value system, moral barometer, ability to reason, and emotional intelligence. In short, Brown is only a reflection of one’s understanding of trust as it relates to a particular situation. Someone may very well trust the colonel as a combatant leader but not to provide care for the person’s child. In fact, when interpreting, thinking, and judgment are applied, one may be able to explain much more clearly the differences that context and situation play in the decision to confer competence- or character-trust. But, no matter what trust one chooses to give or withhold, the important consideration is that it generates from an interpretation of Brown, not from what the colonel may or may not have done. In short, it is not what Brown does, it is how much weight is given to what Brown does.

We often hear that “trust is earned,” but do we consider from what perspective that trust is being given? Trust comes from how I judge you, what I think about you, and how I perceive you—all of which are based on

my experiences with you. But, what if you are a complete stranger? What am I relying on in that instance? What alerts me that I may or may not trust you in the initial interaction? At that moment, my ability to think critically, judge, and reason are all I have to guide me.

Interestingly, in the military, trust—both in terms of character and competence—is considered the starting point. For example, in an overseas joint operation, where a member of the Air Force meets a member of the Marine Corps for the first time, the start point of their working relationship is competency-trust and, much less so, on character-trust beyond the commonly held ideas of service, national pride, commitment, and professionalism. That trust will remain until there is a reason for it not to, based on an event where one of the two in the relationship shows a gap or weakness in competence or character. Importantly though, it is not the gap or weakness itself that matters as much as whether or not one party or the other gives it any positive or negative value as a result of the party’s thinking, judgment, and reasoning.

Implicit, immediate, and unthinking trust can be problematic, especially as people move up the ranks. Just because someone is a four-star-level officer or command master chief, does it mean that person is perfect in terms of character and competence? Clearly not. But here, we hypothesize that this kind of thinking is the norm in the military. In fact, it is the very nature of how a chain of command works that reinforces this thinking every day through the hierarchical design and, at times, overreliance on “that’s just the way it is.” This is the exact kind of thinking that needs to be overtly challenged.

It can be argued that as people become more senior, those around them should become more conscious and sensitive to the possibility of character and (to a lesser extent) competency flaws in their boss. The selection of a person to a senior-level position implies that the person has demonstrated a high degree of competency. However, we are left to learn and assess our level of trust, through our level of value, of that individual’s character based on our observations of what we see and hear.

We propose that the focus of training, education, and development to build trust needs to be on thinking, with a goal of improving one’s judgment and reasoning ability in order to make wise and informed decisions. In short,



(Photo by Capt. Kevin Sandell, 11th Public Affairs Detachment)

Spc. Christopher Sonnier and Sgt. Aaron Adam exchange a "fist bump" before Sonnier is lowered from the hoist to the ground 75 feet below at Camp Slim Lines, Kosovo. The two soldiers from Lake Charles, Louisiana, and Pineville, Louisiana, respectively, are with the Louisiana National Guard's Company F, 2nd Battalion, 244th Aviation Regiment. Flight medics must trust their crew chiefs who operate the hoist controls, especially in dangerous situations.

to develop and improve trust across the military, military members need to improve their self-awareness, critical thinking, judgment, and ability to reason. These skills are critically important, as the importance of character-trust in leadership cannot be overstated or overlooked.

Thinking and Reasoning

Trusting another person, like many other cognitive activities, can occur at the conscious or unconscious level—meaning one can be aware of one's thinking (meta-cognition) or not be aware (mindlessness). Either way, it still occurs. As such, there needs to be much more emphasis placed on unaware thinking, or mindlessness, that which we do or interpret without consideration of why we do it. This point cannot be overstated. Humans can choose to consider how and why they think about something, or not.

The high school football team in Steubenville, Ohio, that filmed a gang rape of a girl who had passed out from too much alcohol is a classic example of not thinking, or mindlessness. Was every student at the party evil? Was every young man in the group guilty of serious character flaws? While the crime is heinous

and, for a thousand reasons, should not have occurred, the more serious question that should be asked is what conditions beyond alcohol (which is too easy a scape-goat here) existed that so many people would not stop to think, reason, and critically decide to intervene to stop the criminal event? There are numerous examples of mindless, unthinking behaviors, and research suggests that mindlessness is not uncommon.

Mindfulness, on the other hand, addresses the quality of the attention given to something or someone, resulting in some level of trust. Weick and Sutcliffe note that mindfulness is "a rich awareness of discriminatory detail." They write,

When people act, they are aware of context, of ways in which details differ (in other words, they discriminate among details), and of deviations from their expectations (mental models). Mindful people have the "big picture," but it is a big picture of the moment. This is sometimes called situation awareness, but we use the concept sparingly. Mindfulness is different from situation awareness in the sense that it involves the

combination of ongoing scrutiny of existing expectations, continuous refinement and differentiation of expectations based on new experiences, willingness and capability to invent new expectations that make sense of unprecedented events, a more nuanced appreciation of context and ways to deal with it, and identification of new dimensions of context that improve foresight and current functioning.⁴

Our goal must be to make thinking a conscious activity. To teach people how to think versus what to think requires enhancing their self-awareness—making a priority of being aware of what they are thinking and feeling and asking why. This competency can be taught and practiced. Noted scholar on leadership development, Bruce Avolio, succinctly states, “we want the brains to come into work, and not to hang outside the door.”⁵

Nathaniel Branden reminds us that humans have, “Free will: the choice to turn consciousness brighter or dimmer.” He goes on to state, “The essence of our psychological freedom may be summarized as follows:

- ◆ We are free to focus our mind, or not to bother, or to actively avoid focusing.
- ◆ We are free to think or not to bother, or to actively avoid thinking.
- ◆ We are free to strive for greater clarity with regard to some issues confronting us, or not to bother, or to actively seek darkness.
- ◆ We are free to examine unpleasant facts or to evade them.”⁶

Branden also writes,

We must *choose* to think. At the conceptual level, we must *guide* and *monitor* our mental processes. We must check our conclusions against all available evidence—that is, we must reason. Reason is an evolutionary development. It is the instrument of awareness raised to the *conceptual* level. It is the power of integration inherent in life made *explicit* and *self-conscious*.⁷

Thinking is a subset and a requirement to be able to reason. One cannot reason if one does not think. Thinking often results in what, while reasoning gets to why. Thinking can disregard emotions and other rational or irrational factors—reasoning includes and takes emotions and all factors into account. You can teach people what to think, but when you teach them how to think, they are starting to learn how to reason.

We hypothesize that people who are self-aware and can think and reason often have a higher and more informed level of trust in themselves and others—as a result of their thinking and reasoning. They are practiced and skilled at this competency. They have learned to trust—to believe in their own understanding of a situation or event or personal interaction over any outside influence. An experiment at Columbia University in the 1960s demonstrates the power of self-awareness, thinking, and reasoning.⁸

In the experiment, a person is in a room alone and told to fill out a clip board. Smoke is then pumped into the room. On average it took 20 seconds for person to react to the “emergency.” Next, the room has five people in it, with four who were told to not react when the smoke comes in. On average, it took 45 seconds for the fifth person to react. Why did this person surrender his or her judgment of right and wrong? Essentially it is because they did not trust themselves. They were not self-aware enough to trust their own thinking and judgment and reasoning, so they surrendered it to the group. Group-think, peer pressure, social desirability, and other social-psychological constructs all are in play in this experiment, but each of these is a consequence or result of individual thinking, judgment, and reasoning.

In the military, structural hierarchy, expected roles and competencies, rank, and station in life all play an important part in why people will surrender their judgment relatively quickly. This can have important consequences for the profession when a service member has to make a competency- or character-trust judgment in an instant. When a private makes a threat determination and decides to engage or not engage someone on the battlefield, what he or she is doing is trusting his or her own thinking and judgment over any other. Again, we should put a premium on the development of that critical thinking, judgment, and self-trust, as an individual’s actions may have very large implications.

From a training or developmental perspective, simply asking a soldier “Why do you think that way?” is developing the soldier’s ability to reason. In terms of trust, there is great developmental value in asking someone, “Why do you trust Sgt. Smith? ... Be specific. In what areas do you trust her? Are there areas in which you would not trust her? Why?” Besides developing reasoning skills, a conversation like this raises the awareness and importance of trust in the ranks.

Finally, reasoning is a higher level of conscious thought and intentional thinking that includes explanation and often leads to a decision or conclusion—a greater level of self-trust and a greater understanding of why they judged something good or bad, or trustworthy or not. Leaders often think about things (organizational culture, operations, personnel decisions, training, etc.), but they reason when they make decisions. Reasoning requires critical thinking, creative thinking, moral reasoning, challenging assumptions, and challenging mental models. Reasoning includes being open to errors in our thinking or judgment. Emotional intelligence and empathy should play a part in one's reasoning. To improve our ability to reason often requires getting out of our cognitive and affective-emotional comfort zone. The ability to reason includes understanding, learning, and adapting.

Conclusion

For the complex operating environments that we have been in and will, in all likelihood, operate in for

the foreseeable future, thoughtful and reasoned trust is what the military wants and needs, not mindless trust. A much more in-depth conversation is also needed on what types of leader the military requires. Do we require competency-trust over character-trust? Or, the other way around?⁹ Either way, real and thoughtful trust, self-trust, is a result of self-awareness, intentional thinking, sound judgment, and analytical reasoning.

The ability to improve one's thinking ability and the ability to reason can be accomplished through education, training, and practice. It requires harnessing one's cognitive strengths and reducing and mitigating one's cognitive limitations (both skills borne of self-awareness and self-management—emotional intelligence). The conversation we need to have about trust development is not about whether we trust another soldier, or leader, or the Army. The real conversation is about developing our ability to trust ourselves, our judgment, and our reasoning. It is in that place that we will freely give our trust to others. ■

Lt. Col. Joe Doty, Ph.D., U.S. Army, retired, is currently working for the Dr. John Feagin Leadership Program and the School of Medicine Leadership Program at Duke University. He is a graduate of West Point, has commanded at the battalion level, and previously served as the deputy director of the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic.

Master Sgt. Jeff Fenlason, U.S. Army, serves as the director of the Raider Initiatives Group, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division. An expert on leader development, training design, and critical thinking, he has been writing and developing leadership solutions to Army problems for years. His work with Bystander Intervention Training has been briefed to the highest levels of the Army and is being considered as a best practice to solve many current social leadership issues.

Notes

Epigraph. "The sleep of reason produces monsters" Caprichos, No. 43 in series (1799), Francisco Goya (1746-1828), [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Goya_-_Caprichos_\(43\)_-Sleep_of_Reason.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Goya_-_Caprichos_(43)_-Sleep_of_Reason.jpg) (accessed 31 March 2015).

1. Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, Gen. Dempsey's Opening Statement for Renomination as Chairman, 18 July 2013, <http://www.jcs.mil/Media/Speeches/tabid/3890/Article/5048/gen-dempseys-opening-statement-for-renomination-as-chairman.aspx> (accessed 23 January 2015).

2. Trust, Center for the Army Profession and Ethic website, <http://cape.army.mil/aaop/trust/> (accessed 23 January 2015).

3. Nicole Carr, "Army General Jeffrey Sinclair in Tears During Final Sentencing Phase," ABC Eyewitness News, Channel 11, Raleigh, NC, 19 March 2014, <http://abc11.com/archive/9472170/> (accessed 23 January 2015).

4. Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe, *Managing the Unexpected: Resilient Performance in an Age of Uncertainty*, 2nd Edition (San Francisco: James Wiley and Sons, 2007).

5. Bruce Avolio, *Leadership Development in Balance: MADE/Born*, (Mahwah, NJ: Earlbaum, 2005) 69.

6. Nathaniel Branden, *The Art of Living Consciously: The Power of Awareness to Transform Everyday Life* (New York: Simon-Schuster, 1997) 48.

7. Branden, 37.

8. Bibb Latane and John M. Darley, "Group Inhibition of Bystander Intervention in Emergencies," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 10, No. 3 (1968): 215-221.

9. Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, speech at West Point, May 1991, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAlhfw9bY5U> (accessed 7 January 2015).