



2nd Place, General Douglas MacArthur Military
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(Photo by Staff Sgt. Taikeila Chancey, 704th Military Intelligence Brigade PAO)

Soldiers with the 741st Military Intelligence Battalion, 704th Military Intelligence Brigade, compete in the battalion's Silent Warrior Challenge 5 October 2012 at Fort Meade, Maryland. The event provided an opportunity for soldiers to build resiliency skills by competing in demanding training events that developed teamwork, esprit de corps, and unit cohesion.

Leading Soldiers with—Not Primarily through— Communication Technology

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Recent advances in communication technology have made the world smaller in many ways. Individuals are now able to communicate

with others in real or near-real time from almost anywhere in the world. While these advances are remarkable, they also engender potentially negative

consequences for an individual's social skills and interactive abilities. These negative consequences can directly affect the U.S. Army because it relies heavily on interpersonal communication and relationships when conducting operations.

The Army is organized to maximize the effectiveness of cohesive teams so they can achieve their objectives. The force's emphasis on the team dynamic is understandable because only through teamwork can it accomplish its fundamental mission—to protect and defend the Nation and its interests. Army leaders need to carefully manage various skills, personalities, and emotions in the stressful circumstances that soldiers are likely to endure so they can protect their people and accomplish their assigned missions. This means leaders should give priority to communication technologies and techniques that enhance interpersonal relationships. They must never allow technology to supplant those relationships. Leaders should emphasize the use of *active communication channels* as the bedrock for unit cohesiveness, developing interpersonal relationships, and accomplishing missions. For the purposes of this article, active communication channels are those most likely to deliver a message immediately to its intended recipient and to elicit immediate confirmation that the recipient has received and understood it. Active channels (e.g., face-to-face) tend to facilitate prompt, interactive feedback for establishing context and clarifying the message because the sender is more able to require the attention and feedback of the receiver.¹ At the other end of the continuum, *passive communication channels* (e.g., text messaging) are those less likely to provide prompt reception and confirmation of the message because they require less attention from the receiver.

Communication Technology Research

Advanced communication technology (such as the Internet, social media, e-mail, and text messages) has been a topic of psychological and sociological research for at least twenty years. Many researchers explore the effect technology has on social skill development and the social well-being of children and adolescents. A research project called the HomeNet Project (a study of how families use the Internet) demonstrated that Internet use correlated with a decline in social

well-being among ten- to nineteen-year-old participants.² Authors Kaveri Subrahmanyam et al. cite research from David Krackhardt that supported the theory that social relationships created online provide less support than those developed face-to-face.³ Additionally, the HomeNet project results demonstrated that online communication correlates with loneliness and depression when involving “weak-tie” relationships.⁴ Weak-tie relationships are formed through online communication, without prior connections between the acquaintances. The relationships are deficient in supportive interpersonal interaction. The HomeNet data showed these patterns over one- and two-year studies; Subrahmanyam et al. maintain that more research is needed into the long-term effects of Internet use on social relationships and well-being.⁵

Other research has yielded a disturbing association between antisocial personality traits and social media use. For example, Laura E. Buffardi and Keith Campbell conducted a study of narcissism and its relationship to the frequency and content of a person's social media site (such as a Facebook page, which is a primarily passive communication channel). The research took self-reported narcissistic ratings of webpage owners and compared them to the ratings of an unbiased observer for narcissistic traits. Higher narcissism ratings correlated with higher levels of activity in the online forum as well as more self-promoting content.⁶ While a causal relationship between social networking sites and narcissism was not established, the correlation is worth noting.

Lt. Col. Joe Doty, U.S. Army, retired, and Master Sgt. Jeff Fenlason, U.S. Army, discuss the problem of extremely narcissistic leaders in a 2013 article in *Military Review*.⁷ Citing leadership research, they assert that toxic leaders tend to exhibit excessive narcissistic traits. When toxic leaders exhibit extreme narcissism, they negatively affect relationships within the team. The implication for communication is that leaders who communicate mainly through passive communication channels might tend to be satisfied with promoting their message to as many people as possible, rather than ensuring that any one recipient understands it in depth. At a minimum, if leaders are emphasizing social media or other passive communication channels, they likely are not developing effective communication skills or interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, any

team member who displays high levels of narcissism likely does not possess effective communication skills or well-functioning interpersonal relationships.

Developing new and meaningful interpersonal relationships is paramount to serving effectively in the military. Soldiers routinely interact with people, often without the benefit of an existing relationship. They need to be able to jump start effective working and social relationships; active channels facilitate a good foundation for both. This is especially true for new soldiers, who typically join the service between the ages of eighteen and twenty. They often find themselves far from their homes and established social networks.

Patti M. Valkenburg and Jochen Peter conducted a review of research literature regarding the Internet and social consequences, published in 2009.⁸ They cite studies indicating a positive relationship between Internet communication and a sense of social connectedness and well-being among adolescents. However, they highlight that this positive relationship was found primarily in adolescents maintaining previously existing relationships. When it came to creating new friendships or communicating with strangers, the positive effects between Internet communication and social connectedness did not hold. This finding supports the idea that a strong connection may not readily form between, for example, a new soldier and a team leader having no prior relationship if their interactions rely heavily on communication technology.

Technological advances make communication more rapid and efficient, but speed and efficiency do not guarantee that communication will be more meaningful or beneficial to teamwork and cohesion. Direct communication and interpersonal skills are vital to developing a strong dynamic among team members. Further research supports that an emphasis on direct, active communication has a generally positive effect on social cohesion. For example, Yuhyung Shin and Kyojik Song conducted a field study of forty-two student groups to assess the relationship of communication channel and time, cohesion, and task performance.⁹ The two communication modes studied were computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication. Previous studies were cited that supported the notion that “when group members are ... close to one another, they are more likely to help one another frequently.”¹⁰ Shin and Song’s study demonstrated that



(Photo by Claire Heininger, visual information specialist, Fort Drum PAO)

A soldier from 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry), communicates using a Nett Warrior device during the Mountain Peak training exercise 19 April 2013 at Fort Drum, New York. Nett Warrior, a handheld situational awareness and messaging tool, is a key component of Capability Set 13, which extends the tactical network down to the dismounted soldier.

more time spent in face-to-face communication had a positive effect on group *social* cohesion, while more time spent in computer-mediated communication had a positive effect on group *task* cohesion.¹¹ Results also supported that face-to-face communication had a positive effect on how well groups performed tasks.¹² Computer-mediated communication presented some value, particularly when it came to specific group task performance. However, social cohesion and group ability to perform in any context were most positively influenced by face-to-face communication.

Effective, direct communication—and the cohesion it subsequently produces—is crucial in a unit’s ability to handle high-stress environments. Military units frequently serve in stressful operational environments, in combat or in garrison; other professions also work in high-stress environments. A network analysis of communication in a medical emergency department, conducted by Daniel P. Patterson et al. in 2013, illustrates the importance of communication and cohesion

for teams that operate under arduous conditions.¹³ The authors describe the emergency department as a “high-risk environment for patients and clinicians that demands colleagues work together as a cohesive group.”¹⁴ The findings indicated that poor team communication was the most common root cause of errors in health care. Additionally, the findings indicated that a concentration of communication was occurring between groups (or cliques) of teammates. The authors further highlighted that many safety-related health programs focus on improving communication.¹⁵

Aside from its importance for task performance, effective communication and cohesion are also tied directly to individual and unit resilience. Paul T. Bartone’s 2006 research discusses resilience and the ability of leaders to influence hardiness in subordinates.¹⁶ According to Bartone, the first of six primary stressors that define military operations is isolation. A further explanation of this stressor is described as follows: “Soldiers deploy to remote locations, far away from home, separated from their families, frequently without good tools or methods for communicating ... often surrounded by coworkers that are new to them.”¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, communication seemed vital to a leader’s ability to shape how

subordinates framed a stressful experience. The “leader who, through example and discussion, communicates a positive construction or reconstruction of shared stressful experiences, may exert an influence on the entire group in the direction of his or her interpretation of experience.”¹⁸ While the article does not specify what communication channels were used to instill hardiness, it is a reasonable assumption that direct, active contact under these circumstances would be most effective.

Technology and Communication in the Army

Like the other military branches, the Army has become heavily reliant on technology to conduct daily operations. Jokes about the Army’s overdependence on Microsoft Outlook and PowerPoint are common at all levels of headquarters. This not to say that the adoption of technological communication tools is entirely negative; many technologies have enhanced the force’s operational effectiveness. Technology has greatly improved commanders’ abilities to understand their operational environments, communicate orders to units, and synchronize warfighting functions. At battalion level and above, technology is essential to exercise mission command effectively. The use of

e-mail enables a brigade commander to send the same structured message to five battalion commanders in five different geographic locations at the click of a mouse button.

However, the operations planned at the battalion level and higher are executed at the company level or lower. Granted, junior leaders need proficiency in communication technologies so they can conduct frequent communication with higher headquarters. However, their team, squad, or platoon cohesion and effectiveness depend primarily on frequent direct interaction and active communication. Views expressed by Army captains at Solarium 2014 (an annual meeting of captains to discuss key issues and develop recommendations for the chief of staff of the Army) support this principle.¹⁹



(Photo by Staff Sgt. Rob Strain, 15th Sustainment Brigade PAO)

Lt. Col. Peter Haas, the commander of the 49th Transportation Battalion, 15th Sustainment Brigade, 13th Sustainment Command, gives his soldiers a safety briefing 20 November 2008 at the brigade’s headquarters on Fort Bliss, Texas, before they begin classes as part of the brigade’s safety stand-down day activities.



(Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Kap Kim, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division PAO)

Soldiers from Troop C "Crazy Horse," 4th Squadron, 9th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, "heave to" against soldiers from Troop D, Forward Support Company's "Defenders," during a tug-of-war competition 17 July 2013 at Fort Hood, Texas. The Crazy Horse team proved victorious in the competition, which was conducted as part of the squadron's family day activities.

Junior soldiers need to know their leaders from team to platoon level, even company level, primarily through direct interaction. Leaders at team, platoon, and company level are wise to use primarily active communication channels (e.g., face-to-face or telephone conversation) more than primarily passive communication channels (e.g., e-mail or text message). The message may be delivered, but confirmation may not be provided quickly. In executing operations at the company level and below, both information and confirmation that a message is clearly received are essential for accountability and mission success.

In order to develop cohesive teams, leaders must actively communicate regularly and effectively with their subordinates. In addition, leaders should understand the time and place for using passive communication channels, and they should avoid overusing them.

Soldiers' proclivity for depending on communicating through technology was apparent to me during my time as a company commander from 2010 to 2012. During a month of consolidated training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina in November 2011, I directed that cell phones

were not authorized for soldiers (staff sergeant and below) during the established training hours. There were two main reasons for this decision: first, the use of cell phones for sending text messages or using the Internet could become a training distraction; and second, I wanted to set conditions for personal, face-to-face interactions to take place. The latter reason was especially important because our unit had experienced significant personnel turnover following redeployment just six months before. As one might expect, this decision was not popular; it required daily leader inspection to ensure the directive was being followed.

During a company after action review with sergeants and staff sergeants in early December 2011, many grievances were voiced about the logic of my decision regarding cell phones. Their argument was that I had taken their "power base from them" (their words) by denying their immediate access to communication during training hours. They believed that, void of instant communication with their soldiers, they were not able to adequately monitor whereabouts and maintain accountability. The over-dependency on technology was clear: if young

leaders at the squad-level associate one channel of communication with power, technology has become a crutch for the most basic of interactions. My counterargument was, first, to explain the logic behind my decision. I continued by discussing that I had removed (or limited) a means of communication, but I stressed that *communication itself* was their power base—not the specific means. I created a more restrictive environment for communication, but this should not have been their primary concern. They should have adjusted their style in order to maintain communication with their soldiers in other, more active methods. In other words, I implicitly told the noncommissioned officers that they should not be “leading by text.”

Why do soldiers overuse technology to communicate? They overuse it because it is convenient, inexpensive, and easy to control. Writer Jeffrey Kluger explains the appeal of conversation by texting:

I embraced the arrival of e-mail and, later, texting. They meant a conversation I could control—utterly. I get to say exactly what I want, exactly when I want to say it. It consumes no more time than I want it to and, to a much greater degree than is possible with a phone call, I get to decide if it takes place at all.²⁰

Kluger’s justifications may not be all encompassing, but it is reasonable to assume that many share his self-oriented perspective. Despite the need for text message communications at times, this self-serving justification is, in many ways, contrary to Army values. Selfless service to the Nation may involve taking an emergency phone call at an odd hour of the night, on a weekend with family, or at some other inconvenient time. In the context of selfless Army service, however, the point is not to satisfy a soldier’s wish to communicate using a certain channel. It is the duty of soldiers and leaders to ensure messages are sent, received, and understood via the most effective channels. Moreover, relationships among team members matter more than an individual’s convenience. Relationships are essential to mission accomplishment, and building them depends on emphasizing active communication channels.

Face-to-Face Communication— A Vignette

On 6 April 2011, I received an inconvenient and life-changing phone call. I was on block leave following our company redeployment, spending time with

my wife at a hockey game. Perhaps I could have avoided the call and enjoyed the rest of my evening, but that would have only delayed the inevitable. The call I received was one that no leader wants—one of our recently redeployed soldiers was involved in a serious motorcycle accident. My wife and I immediately left the hockey game for the hospital, hoping to uncover the details and to provide support to his friends and family. When we arrived at the intensive care unit, his prognosis looked grim; the nineteen-year-old soldier was in a medically induced coma, and his brain was swelling after undergoing emergency surgery to amputate his right arm. I arrived earlier than the soldier’s mother and, eventually, had to share the news I just received with her face-to-face. I will always remember her look of horror after I delivered the unwanted message. She fell apart in the most poignant way; her reaction was completely understandable. The next few emotionally draining hours turned into the remaining weeks of my block leave; I spent the majority of my time in the intensive care unit awaiting the next steps. The soldier’s condition progressively degraded, forcing his mother to make the unfortunate decision to remove him from life support 15 April. He passed away within hours.

This was a high-stress leadership moment where face-to-face communication was not merely the *right* answer; it was the *only* answer. As commander, I fully accept responsibility for all that happened in my unit, which included this soldier’s death. The soldier’s mother was not under my command, yet I owed her the best information and support I could provide, delivered personally, at a time in which she needed it. Passive communication would not have sufficed in this situation. Leaders need to be present and directly engaged, especially in the toughest situations. Soldiers and their family members deserve nothing less.

Conclusion

Leaders must embrace the concept of selfless service and model it for soldiers. Leaders cannot allow their soldiers to be seduced by the idea that their communication preferences are more important than their duty. Leaders should prioritize face-to-face communication as a means of understanding their soldiers’ values, principles, and emotions. Counseling sessions and end-of-day formations

provide opportunities for such interaction. Training and accountability at this level will further develop soldiers and create the kind of relationships and team cohesiveness the Army needs.

It is clear that developments in technology have rapidly advanced our means for communicating. Advanced communication technology is a phenomenon born of the information age; it is one that is likely to progress in its availability and use. People will continue to use technology for routine communication, and the channels for communicating will, no doubt, evolve further. These advances help leaders command and control large formations more efficiently, thus enabling mission accomplishment. Even so, there are potentially negative effects for individual social skills, connectedness, and

unit cohesion from relying too heavily on communicating through technology.

Protecting lives while enabling a unit to succeed in combat or under stressful circumstances necessitates strong unit cohesion. Moreover, individuals may further develop their personal resilience and social skills by emphasizing active communication channels. The recent advances in technology are certainly astounding, but optimally, personal relationships are built primarily upon direct contact, communication, and trust. The Army needs this trust to be firmly established by direct, active communication, with support from communication technology, rather than primarily by communication through mediating technologies. ■

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Notes

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