



Sgt. Juan Garcia, assigned to Battery B, 6th Battalion, 37th Field Artillery Regiment, 210th Field Artillery Brigade, inspects a soldier during the drill and ceremony event on day four of the 2nd Infantry Division Best Warrior Competition, 17 April 2019, Camp Casey, Republic of Korea. The competition served as a valuable training experience for all soldiers involved and the winners advanced to the Eighth Army Best Warrior Competition held in May 2019. (Photo courtesy of the Eighth U.S. Army Public Affairs)

Leading Successful Organizations— Relationships Matter

Brig. Gen. Mark A. Holler, U.S. Army

As I come to the end of my career, I feel compelled to share some insights and experiences that shaped me into the Army leader I am

today. I believe leader development is an essential task for senior leaders, and we fail if we do not invest in the development of others. A leader's legacy is not the rank

or position achieved but the success of those they have led. My sincere hope is that my lessons learned may benefit current leaders rising through the ranks of this Army that I love.

During my thirty-plus year career, I observed what I considered to be a handful of superb leaders, many average leaders, and even a few abysmal leaders. As a young lieutenant, I started recording my observations and thoughts in little green record books. Some of these insights include the good, bad, and ugly of my leadership journey. I labeled the green books “Leadership Food for Thought.” I continue this practice today as a brigadier general.

My written observations typically include a central point and vignette to illustrate a leadership lesson. This practice served as a self-development tool and a reminder of the type of leader I wanted to be. Over the years, I documented well over a hundred leadership observations. Periodic review and revisions followed as I matured into an Army senior leader. I can sum up my annotations in one sentence: *The Army is a people business in which relationships really do matter.*

Leader-to-led relationships have tremendous impact on an organization’s overall productivity and success. This is true at scale. Whether a five-person team, a one hundred-person company, or a much larger brigade formation, the interaction between the leader and followers is extremely important. Based on my insights, I conclude that the three most critical subcomponents of relationships in successful organizations are (1) communication, (2) trust, and (3) accountability.

Communication

Communication forms the foundation on which all relationships are built. Unfortunately, leader communication is often a shortcoming within professional organizations. In the early 1990s, when I first started my Army career, communication between a leader and followers was typically a one-way conversation. “Do what I say and don’t ask why” was a routine response when subordinates started to ask too many questions. There was little dialogue beyond the commander declaring mission and intent. The most significant bottom-up communication occurred when subordinate leaders briefed the commander on

the concept of operation to accomplish their assigned task.

Lead By Example

The most effective leaders I observed took extra time to articulate the bigger picture, including the why behind orders given. These leaders understood that information is power. They empowered their subordinates with a broader perspective that showed how their contribution served a greater purpose. Over time, the Army has improved in this area due to changes in leader education and because today’s generation of young soldiers and leaders respond better when more information is provided.

Communication must be two-way. Two-way communication facilitates a shared and more complete understanding and supports better decision-making. To achieve effective two-way communication, leaders must develop and foster an environment in which followers can and will freely express their thoughts and ideas to the boss. This includes thoughts and ideas that may be counter to the leader’s current views.

I have served in situations wherein offering an alternate point of view from that of the commander was considered an act of treachery. As a battalion operations officer preparing for deployment, I led staff analysis in developing a recommended advance party composition to fill a certain number of slots allocated by our higher headquarters. This was my third deployment and second to Afghanistan, so I was somewhat familiar with battalion advance party roles and responsibilities. Also, the proposed advance party roster was largely informed by our recent predeployment site survey. As I began to brief the battalion commander on the recommended by-position roster, he abruptly cut me off, criticized the proposal, and directed changes that omitted several key staff positions, including some within the operations shop that I led. When I attempted to offer reasoning for the staff’s recommendation, the commander quickly rejected my input and allowed no further discussion on the

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Col. Michael Kloepper, commander of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, speaks to his battalion and company commanders about fire-finding radar capabilities during a leadership validation exercise on 18 October 2021 at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in the Hohenfels Training Area, Germany. This training was part of Exercise Bayonet Ready 22. (Photo by Staff Sgt. John Yountz, U.S. Army)

matter. The executive officer later told me that my dissenting opinion was considered an act of disloyalty by the battalion commander.

In hindsight, it may have been more appropriate for me to reengage with the commander in a one-on-one setting. Regardless, the public dismissal coupled by the thought that my contribution was not valued affected me in negative ways. I felt unappreciated. For a brief period, my attitude and motivation were adversely impacted. My view of the boss as a leader was permanently changed. I made a promise to myself that I would try to never to make others feel as I felt in that moment.

Two-way communication requires active listening, especially on the part of the leader. A healthy balance of active communication and active listening is essential. Often, leaders spend too much time in broadcast mode and not enough time in receive mode. The order in which a leader broadcasts and receives is also important. My experience has taught me to start with a short broadcast of intent and guidance, followed by a

lengthy period in receive mode, before ending with me communicating final remarks or direction. The lengthy periods in receive mode can be punctuated by some back-and-forth dialogue stimulated by the leader asking probing questions and then thoughtfully listening to the responses. The overall objective for the leader during active listening is to facilitate and maximize input from their followers.

What leaders communicate is very important. I believe the two most important things that leaders must routinely communicate are priorities and expectations. Priorities should be a rank-ordered list of the top three most important things to the leader and/or the organization. More than the top three can distort the significance of what is most important. Articulating priorities provides clarity of purpose and direction for resourcing and effort. It empowers subordinate leaders to operate with initiative.

It is important for organization members to understand when and why priorities change. Leaders are

responsible for this communication. My experience is that smaller organizations within larger ones change priorities more often than the upper echelons. For example, a division commander is likely to change priorities on a quarterly basis based on the broad scope of the missions and tasks the division is expected to accomplish. Subordinate formations, from brigade level to squad/team level, will change their priorities more often as they undertake the numerous subtasks that

mostly on what went wrong and how to incorporate corrective actions.

My leader development style remained the same in the years that followed my time as an observer/controller, including when I received this feedback as a battalion commander. My conversations with junior leaders typically went, “Your unit did a lot of things great, but let’s focus on these three things that did not go so well.” My reputation was that of a hard-nosed

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support higher-echelon mission success.

Expectations provide perspective and clarity of performance goals. Leaders owe this to those they lead as a means of setting them up for success. Clearly communicating what is expected allows leaders to judge which followers are driven to achieve individual and organizational goals. It helps the leader identify talent within the organization and inform developmental plans for those not meeting the mark.

Communicating expectations also provides a level of predictability. This is especially important when there may be “rough roads ahead.” From my experience, a leader’s forewarning of a potential or pending challenge helps organizational members prepare for and proactively overcome the difficulty. Conversely, one of the quickest ways to negatively impact organizational morale is lack of predictability. This is compounded if the leader possesses the knowledge to forewarn his or her subordinates of an impending challenge but does not communicate it.

The undertone of a leader’s communication matters. I was once told by a subordinate leader that I was so brutally honest it hurt. I first took this as a compliment. I prided myself in being direct and to the point in my communication with others. I did not sugarcoat anything and quite frankly had negative opinions of other leaders I considered to be cheerleaders. This was a byproduct of my formative years as an observer/controller at the Joint Readiness Training Center. The postbattle after action reviews I facilitated focused

leader that expected perfection. In response, some of my followers were more concerned about potential failure than innovative success. The point I am making here is overemphasis on failures, despite good intentions, can have negative impacts on others’ performance and development.

After reflecting on the feedback, I made a concerted effort to be more positive in my communication with others. I purposely focused more effort uplifting others and publicly highlighting successes. As a result, others’ perceptions of me as a leader changed for the better based on subsequent comments I received from those who have known me throughout my career.

A final point about effective two-way communication is that it demonstrates that a leader cares about those he or she leads. It illustrates the relevance of junior organizational members and encourages their commitment. It also enables trust.

Trust

Going back to the structure analogy, if effective two-way communication forms the foundation of healthy relationships, then trust provides structural integrity. Trust is earned, and it does not come easily. It is a precious commodity that leaders should always be mindful of. In most cases, trust between the leader and followers is built over time through consistent behavior and shared experiences.

A leader’s actions must match their communications to gain the trust of their subordinates. Followers



Sgt. Auralie Suarez and Pvt. Brett Mansink take cover in a ditch 7 March 2007 in Al Doura, Iraq. The soldiers are from Company C, 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, and were on a joint patrol in Al Rashid when their unit received small-arms fire. The image epitomizes trust as the soldiers are covering each other's backs. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Sean A. Foley, U.S. Army)

who are true to their word and deliver consistent results will garner their leader's respect and trust. Shared experiences require leaders to be present among their followers. The adage that "seeing is believing" certainly applies here. Followers must observe the transparent actions of their leader to fully form an opinion on the leader's trustworthiness.

Trust bonds can be broken in an instant. The quickest way to lose someone's trust is through hypocrisy. Hypocritical leader actions are quickly noticed and long remembered. Several times in my career, I observed leaders holding others accountable to a standard that they themselves did not account to. I call this a case of "the video not matching the audio." "Lead by example" is not just a catchy leadership mantra. It is required for followers to fully trust their leadership.

Being genuine, fair, and bestowing dignity and respect to followers are also significant leader attributes required to build and maintain trust. I once had a very talented peer who did not demonstrate these

qualities. This person was technically and tactically proficient, could articulate a vision, and drove his organization to produce results. Superiors loved him and rewarded him with developmental opportunities, superior evaluation reports, and ultimately early promotions. His peers and subordinates absolutely mistrusted him.

Tragically, this person's success came at the expense of peers and those under his charge. He refused to be a team player and consistently worked behind the scenes to disadvantage his peers. He treated people with disdain and willingly threw others under the bus when bad things happened. He was also a micromanager who refused to empower junior leaders. In sum, this leader trusted no one, was loyal only to himself, and used others for personal gain.

His self-centered actions adversely impacted almost every person he touched. His reputation remains mud decades removed. Whenever I gather to commune with old comrades and reminisce about past service



Soldiers from 173rd Airborne Brigade lay out equipment for turn-in during Task Force Harvest on 24 July 2019 at Caserma Del Din in Vicenza, Italy. (Photo by Pfc. Andrew Webb Buffington, U.S. Army)

together, this person always comes up. New details of his selfish, counterproductive leadership often emerge. I believe leaders like this are what drove many of the Army's "People First" reforms such as the Battalion Command Assessment Program and the Colonels Command Assessment Program.

My final shared observation on trust is sometimes leaders must "pay it forward" early on in leader-to-follower relationships. This is especially true when a leader joins an organization with established subordinate teams led by seemingly capable subordinate leaders (e.g., a new commander assuming command of a unit). Paying trust forward demonstrates the leader is committed to relationship building, subordinate leader development, and empowerment.

Accountability

Accountability signifies the cornerstone of successful professional relationships. It provides purposeful direction and serves as a measuring guide for interactions between leaders and followers. The cornerstone

is typically the first stone laid down when a structure is built. Within the context of sharing my views on successful professional relationships, I chose to discuss the "accountability cornerstone" last because effective two-way communication is a precursor to building trust, and trusted leaders can more effectively implement accountability.

The Army is a profession, which by nature has standards for behavior, skills, knowledge, and performance to which members must adhere and achieve. Leaders inside the profession must hold their followers accountable to established professional norms. Those that consistently fail to achieve these standards simply may not belong.

There are certainly negative connotations about "holding someone accountable" that make some uncomfortable. Because of this, many leaders I have observed are often willing to accept unmet standards. These types of leaders are by and large ineffective and do not deliver results. They ultimately undermine their own authority and harm the people and organizations

they lead. Acceptance over accountability does not support leader, follower, or organization success.

Accountability should not be viewed as a dark cloud hovering overhead, ready to unleash a lightning bolt on anyone who fails to meet the mark. It should mostly be a positive developmental tool for caring leaders. It includes rewarding superior performance through public recognition, well-written performance reports, and advancement, to name a few considerations. Leaders should purposefully hold their followers accountable for excellence in these ways.

I have not always gotten this right. Before I explain, let me first offer some contextual information. The first twenty-five years of my career, I unwisely avoided the Pentagon and the inspector general like the plague. However, my assignment following brigade command encompassed both. I had the fortune to serve as the executive officer to the inspector general of the Army. For many reasons, this proved to be an extremely developmental thirteen-month assignment. A requirement for this duty was successful graduation from the Inspector General Basic Course.

In the basic course, inspectors general are trained to determine causation for subpar actions and/or results. Examples could be an act of indiscipline under investigation or a failed inspection. Inspectors general learn there are basically three root causes when a standard is not met: (1) lack of knowledge, (2) inability, and (3) an informed choice. Typically, in the first two causations, a leader somewhere in the chain failed to properly educate or resource a responsible subordinate leader or follower. These are ultimately cases of failed leadership. The third root cause is where a responsible agent had the knowledge and/or resources to meet a standard but chose not to take the appropriate action. This puts the burden squarely on the responsible person.

Why is it important for leaders to discern root causes? The answer is it provides direction for accountability in the form of developmental corrective action. My evolved method of correcting a random soldier for a uniform infraction is a simple illustration of how I have grown as a leader. As a junior leader my approach was confrontational, during which I would imply the soldier lacked discipline. In

hindsight, my aggressive ill-informed approach was a bigger wrong than the uniform infraction itself. No matter how right I was, I was wrong in my accountability approach regardless of the root cause. I am certain the soldiers back then did not walk away feeling developed by an inspirational leader. My accountability approach most likely left them bitter and more focused on my leader reaction than their failure to maintain a professional standard.

Today, I strive to be inspirational while holding others accountable to a standard. For the example of a uniform infraction, I now start a friendly conversation with the soldier. I ask if they are aware of their uniform violation and provide developmental knowledge if they are not. The responses I now get are usually ones of gratitude for taking the time to educate and set them up for success. If the answer is by choice, this clues me in on a larger issue with the soldier that I need to caringly explore. Leaders who hold others accountable to a standard in the right way will foster professional growth and willingness to contribute with maximum effort. Simply put, when people are held accountable for their work and actions by a caring and concerned leader, they will strive to get better at what they do and produce better results.

Like effective communication and trust, accountability goes both ways. Leaders are accountable to those under their charge. When I served as a commanding general, I made it a point to often communicate that I was accountable to every person within the command, down to the lowest ranking individual. Soldiers and subordinate leaders counted on me to be a good general, do good with my authority, serve their needs, set them up for success, and be a superb soldier first and foremost.

Conclusion

Army leaders must be proactive in fostering relationships with their followers. These relationships are strongest when a trust bond forged through constructive two-way communications between genuine leaders and their followers is established. Strong leader-follower relationships coupled with mutual accountability to high standards will generate individual empowerment, leader development, organizational productivity, and superior mission success. ■