

Professional Discourse and Dialogue Made Easy

Lt. Gen. Milford H. Beagle Jr., U.S. Army

Editor's note: In late November, Army University Press leadership participated in a Chief of Staff of the Army-sponsored workshop focused on improving professional military writing and discourse. Over the course of 2024 (and beyond), AUP will continue our program of initiatives to meet the CSA's intent and support of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command and the Combined Arms Center's focus on "Strengthening the Army Profession."

Albert Einstein stated, "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough." Similarly, in a book titled *Brief*, it stated that "if you can't explain something in eight to ten words, you don't understand it well enough."¹ My title, "Professional Dialogue and Discourse Made Easy," is not my explanation, but an expression of what the past few days have really been about. My eight to ten words are these: "Write to spark professional dialogue and drive change," explains what we are trying to do and achieve.

Writing has a key role in driving change, and professional discourse and dialogue have an even bigger role. I'm not talking about the writing we do in comment resolution matrices, emails, information papers, briefs, and so on. I'm talking about the writing we do as professionals among professionals. Yet, according to a Department of the Army pamphlet, *Effective Writing for Army Leaders*, last published in 1986, "Too much Army writing does not communicate well. It confuses rather than clarifies; it is wordy rather than concise; it hinders the main idea rather than getting to the point."² I say this is true, true, and true, and the same can be said for the year 2023. Do we want to have this conversation again in another 30 years?

I will share with you three things: how we got here, how we can get this done, and how we can move forward.



Lt. Gen. Milford H. Beagle Jr. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

First, we must understand how we got here (because what got us here won't get us there). Where is there? Again, using eight to ten words, "there" or the destination is, "professional discourse at the speed of change—used to drive change." So, what got us here?

1. Increased demand with dwindling resources (there is no finger to point). In tough times we make tough choices, and we chose not to invest in this area (people, time, energy, etc). You can tell someone's priorities based on where they spend their time, energy, and money.
2. We got comfortable being comfortable. Our focus on writing and professional dialogue in the past

was like Blockbuster Video, and Netflix simply blew by us.

3. Many of our training and education courses focus on how to think but not how to write. But writing is thinking. And it is hard. Good writing is *disciplined* thinking.

Now we are here. But there is hope. We can drive this change in three ways. However, before I share them, it is important to understand that we can't assume that if it is written, it will be read. Or if it is read, it will be used. Or if it is used (e.g., discussed, debated, comprehended, and countered) it will drive change. These are things we must consider as we determine how we change.

I'd say we haven't been totally asleep at the wheel. And going forward, we have three key capabilities at our disposal. First, we have all of you (as part of the ecosystem). Second, we have a driver, the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Commanding General (CG). Third, we have a champion for the Harding project—the Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA). We have all the right ingredients to drive change. To be sure, there are roadblocks in front of us that we must recognize, admit, and address. Moreover, these changes are not for our institutional force alone to solve. We need our operational force and our self-development domain—the other two pillars of professional military education and leader development.

Now, here are my three easy ways to drive this change:

1. **Our force must learn how to write (again).** I recall days of staff duty where the assignment to the commander in the morning was a paper. I remember doing the same as a battalion and brigade commander. Writing takes practice.
2. **Help Soldiers and leaders overcome a fear of writing and the feedback.** To write is to think, but it is also to be vulnerable and who wants to be vulnerable?
3. **Encourage, endorse, and create environments** where our teammates will be willing to give of their time to write.

Finally, how do we move forward? We have all the right ingredients. To help me frame the way forward, I will use author John Kotter's model for leading change.³

1. **Create urgency.** If you have heard the CSA lately or reviewed his guidance and focus areas, you

know this is a priority. As the saying goes "if it is a priority to your boss—it should fascinate you." I'm utterly fascinated!

2. **Build a powerful coalition.** I'm looking at it, and I'm in charge of part of it at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the Combined Arms Center (CAC). In fact, all commanders are part of this coalition.
3. **Create a vision for change.** It's simple: strengthen our profession of arms. Creating professional dialogue is a way.
4. **Communicate the vision.** How we tell this story matters. We do not need people to "buy-in;" we need people to believe. If they believe their words and thoughts matter, they will give of their time to write.
5. **Remove obstacles.** I've mentioned a few and ask that you think of more.
6. **Plan for and create short term wins.** We have many. But we need more, and we need them quickly. Naysayers are not patient people.
7. **Build on change.** What we build can't be stolen on a thumb drive. For example, our Army's secret sauce is that we buy things and fight formations at echelon. This can't be stolen. Communicating to drive change and strengthen our profession is another thing that can't be stolen. We can create the type of intellectual property that you can't steal. However, to build it, we must lay the foundation, and this is that foundation.
8. **Anchor the change in our culture.** Professional discourse

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and dialogue must become a part of our Army DNA. We were here before and drifted off course. This is why we now know about and share the story of Maj. Harding and the *Infantry Journal*.

Here's the big idea! As senior leaders, the goal is to get the big ideas right. How do we avoid having these conversations again 30 years from now? Our goal is to be good ancestors. We can't waste time discussing what are we going to do. We must spend time determining how to do it. CAC is all in on this as a key driver for TRADOC and enabling TRADOC to drive change for our Army. Here is how:

1. Meet people where they are. Educate the force. Break the barriers of writing being hard through education, practice and skills development across professional military education (PME).
2. Make the critical choice between fidelity or convenience (in this case effectiveness). We can't have both. This comes from the book *Trade Off*—forget about chasing a fidelity mirage.⁴
3. Working with TRADOC we can determine resources, create the right incentives, and determine sustainability.

We don't want to be here 30 years from now re-learning old lessons. A lack of resources and focus got us here. More writing isn't better writing—inspired writing is better, and urgent communication of a vision and reduction of barriers drive change. Professional dialogue and discourse could be made easy because of all of you and the time you spent here working to bring hard with the Harding project to fruition. **Drive Change, Forge Victory. This We'll Defend. ■**

Notes

1. Joseph McCormack, *Brief: Make a Bigger Impact by Saying Less* (New York: Wiley, 2014).

2. Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-67, *Effective Writing for Army Leaders* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986).

3. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012).

4. Kevin Maney, *Trade-Off: Why Some Things Catch On, and Others Don't* (New York: Crown, 2010).

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