A platoon sergeant with the 1st Battalion "First Rock," 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, directs his paratroopers as they capture an airfield during an emergency deployment readiness exercise at Rivolto Air Base in Udine, Italy, on 26 September 2017. (Photo by Lt. Col. John Hall, 173rd Airborne Brigade)

The Foundation of Excellence

Trustworthy Leaders and a Positive Command Climate

Sgt. Maj. Pedro I. Campoverde, U.S. Army

The relationship between organizational leaders and their personnel is the backbone of success in any operational environment. This relationship is particularly critical in the military, where lives are often on the line, and decisions can have far-reaching consequences. Effective leadership relies on having a shared purpose, clear direction, and strong motivation between leaders and their teams.[1] Characterized by trust, respect, motivation, and open communication, a positive command climate is essential for fostering a culture of excellence, driving mission success, and promoting the well-being of personnel. It creates an environment in which there should not be any personal, social, or organizational obstacles that stop soldiers from reaching their full potential and taking on the highest responsibilities they are capable of.[2] Therefore, at the heart of a positive command climate is the presence of trustworthy leaders who prioritize the development and welfare of their soldiers. I want to share reflections on individuals—in their own way and at different stages of my military service—who left a lasting impression by being trustworthy leaders and fostering a positive command climate that is key to achieving organizational excellence.

The Impact of Trust

My initial development as a brand-new specialist at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in 1998 was overseen by Staff Sgt. Jeff Knudsen. The impact of trust on an organization cannot be overstated, because it is the foundation of any successful relationship, and the leader-subordinate relationship is no exception. Knudsen cared for and developed me into a soldier as my first-line supervisor. He exemplified trust by constantly communicating situations, acknowledging risks, and reinforcing confidence. I can still remember his end-of-the-month performance counseling sessions. He took the time to discuss personal and professional goals and communicated with me to understand me and help me feel like a member of the section. Through well-thought plans of action and follow-up sessions, he trusted what I could do and never pretended to have all the answers. People tend to listen to and be influenced by those they trust.[3] When trust is present, it profoundly affects the behavior and performance of personnel, leading to a significant boost in morale, motivation, and job satisfaction. I remember a particular field training exercise during which I was worried about balancing civilian education and pursuing my promotable status. Knudsen did not dismiss my concerns or wish my doubts away; he walked me through the importance of setting goals, not just showing me "how" to do it but explaining "why." This positive impact reassures the team, fosters an optimistic outlook, and instills confidence and positivity in team members.

On the other side, not building a trusting environment or allowing discrimination or harassment to occur or continue unchecked can harm teamwork and damage a team's trust in their leaders. After Knudsen left our unit for the Green to Gold program, we received a new first-line supervisor. He unfortunately displayed destructive leadership behaviors like "favoritism, personal biases, unethical behavior, and poor communication [that] often creates suspicion, doubt, and distrust" among everyone who worked with him.[4] He did not care about understanding or developing soldiers. As an organizational leader, he demonstrated untrustworthiness by creating an environment where nobody felt valued, supported, and empowered to perform at their best. We were short on personnel once and struggled with recurring maintenance issues threatening our section's readiness; rather than sharing hardships with soldiers, our new NCO would lose his temper and publicly berate us. He repeatedly attempted to fix the problem secretly, covering up issues rather than seeking help from other leaders. Trust fosters a sense of safety, where individuals feel comfortable sharing their ideas, concerns, and feedback without fear of reprisal or judgment. Leaders like Knudsen, who were transparent, honest, and fair, fostered a sense of security and stability among their soldiers. This, in turn, encourages open communication, collaboration,

Sgt. Maj. Pedro Campoverde, U.S. Army, is the XVIII Airborne Corps equal opportunity sergeant major at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He holds a BS from Upper Iowa University and an MS from Excelsior University. During his career, Campoverde has served with the 17th Fires Brigade, the 2nd Infantry Division, the 1st Armored Division, the 1st Infantry Division, the 165th Infantry Brigade, the Fires Center of Excellence, and the 25th Infantry Division. He also taught the Military Equal Opportunity Advisor Course at the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute.

1st Sgt. Timothy Simmons, assigned to Eagle Troop, 2nd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, inspects a soldier before starting a promotion board during Agile Spirit 19 at the Vaziani Military Base near Tbilisi, Georgia, 6 August 2019. (Photo by Pfc. Denice Lopez, U.S. Army)

and innovation, as unit members are more likely to take calculated risks and work together to achieve common organizational goals.[5] In the military context, trust is crucial for effective decision-making and risk-taking. When trust is present, leaders and team members can confidently make decisions knowing they have the support and understanding of their colleagues. Moreover, trust directly impacts retention, as personnel are likelier to stay with an organization that values and supports them. Seeing Knudsen pursue a commission motivated me to reenlist, and I wanted to follow his example. It can have a multiplier effect, driving organizational excellence, improving decision-making, and enhancing overall performance. However, the consequences can be severe when trust is broken by leaders, leading to decreased productivity, increased turnover, and a hostile work environment. Rebuilding broken trust is not easy as it takes understanding the situation and hard work from everyone involved.[6] Trust is a critical component of a positive command climate, and leaders who prioritize building and maintaining trust with their soldiers are more likely to achieve their command goals and create a thriving, high-performing organization.

Characteristics of Trustworthy Leaders

So, what makes a leader trustworthy? Former NFL head coach Tony Dungy stated that trustworthy leaders exhibit competence, integrity, security, and authenticity.[7] However, good leadership involves much more than the apparent characteristics of these four traits; it also takes skills such as understanding the needs of others.[8] Dungy's observations of those embodying these four traits highlight one of the first senior NCOs I worked with as a newly promoted sergeant while at Fort Riley, Kansas, in 2003. Sgt. 1st Class Anatalio Salas was a genuine leader who was faithful to himself and led others with humility and authenticity. He was reliable, followed his commitments, and maintained confidentiality when necessary. One time, I thought I would be labeled as an incompetent leader when one of my soldiers was caught coming on-post driving under the influence. Salas quickly realized my concern, and his priority was not to assign blame but to listen and make a point to learn from difficulties. Loyal leaders like Salas demonstrate a commitment to their team members and organization, standing by them through thick and thin. Accountable

Staff Sgt. Nilberto Navarro (*center*), a squad leader in the 51st Transportation Company, briefs his soldiers and performs precombat checks prior to the start of a training patrol 29 July 2015 in Sennelager, Germany. (Photo by 2nd Lt. Kyle Hensley, U.S. Army)

leaders take ownership of their mistakes, learn from them, and make things right when they go wrong.[9] I saw Salas achieve success and fulfillment by helping his soldiers focus on learning and improving in their personal and professional lives, similar to Dungy's observations of leaders building trust with their teams and fostering a positive and productive work environment. For example, Salas held individual meetings with me, listening and acknowledging my concerns as an NCO and a newlywed getting ready to serve his first combat deployment. Organizational leaders must be "competent, of good character, and fair and reliable to generate trust."[10] Trustworthy leaders like Salas possess these unique qualities that inspire team confidence and loyalty. They are transparent and honest in their communication, consistently demonstrating integrity and authenticity in their words and actions. These leaders are also empathetic and approachable, actively listening to the concerns and ideas of their team members and fostering a culture of open dialogue and feedback, empowering the team and making them feel heard.[11]

Additionally, trustworthy leaders are accountable and take responsibility for their mistakes, using them as opportunities for growth and learning. During our first combat deployment to Iraq, Salas inherited a platoon affected by low discipline and morale. He took ownership of the problem and transformed the collective attitude by addressing ignored concerns and having soldiers feel like they were more than just numbers. This emphasis on accountability helped me feel secure and confident in his leadership, knowing he was willing to take responsibility for his subordinates. Salas led by example, demonstrating a strong work ethic and a commitment to excellence and making tough decisions while prioritizing the well-being and success of the team.[12] By embodying these characteristics, trustworthy leaders like Salas build strong relationships, establish a positive and productive work environment, and earn the respect and trust of their colleagues, superiors, and followers.

The Impact of Trustworthy Leaders on Command Climate

Trustworthy leaders profoundly impact the command climate, creating an environment of mutual respect, trust, and open communication.[13] Command Sgt. Maj. David Banuelos was one of those leaders. His

dependable leadership played a key role in my development as a senior NCO within his battalion, eventually influencing one of my most challenging decisions.[14] As a platoon sergeant in 2014, I faced an ethical decision involving several of my soldiers' misconduct while deployed in the Middle East. I needed to have the personal courage to come forward and notify my chain of command when I learned that my soldiers had consumed alcohol and drove a nontactical vehicle in violation of prescribed policy and orders. As a result, personal and professional relationships were affected, but I knew it was the right thing to do. During this time, Banuelos helped me understand that when we take the hard right and do the right thing, the command climate becomes more productive as unit members feel valued, motivated, and committed to the organization's mission and goals.[15] A trustworthy leader like Banuelos helped me make a difficult decision and hold people accountable. His example of good character, fairness, and accountability as the unit's senior NCO gave me a sense of steadiness during one of my most challenging times in the Army. He created a favorable climate by encouraging open and honest communication up, down, and across the chain of command. People feel safe voicing concerns, offering suggestions, and even admitting mistakes without fear of retribution. This transparency builds trust. Leaders who demonstrate these characteristics create a positive command climate that profoundly impacts their organization. For example, a positive command climate is characterized by high morale, open communication, collaboration, innovation, and retention. When personnel feel valued, supported, and motivated, they enjoy increased job satisfaction and engagement. When trustworthy leaders foster an environment where people feel comfortable sharing their concerns, ideas, and feedback, they work together effectively, sharing knowledge and expertise to achieve common goals.[16] It is important to show that building trust within a team is more than being nice; it can also require hard choices when holding people accountable. Finally, a positive command climate encourages calculated risk-taking and innovation, driving organizational growth and improvement in an environment where personnel are more likely to stay with an organization that values and supports them, reducing turnover and improving continuity.

Conclusion

The relationship between trustworthy leaders and a positive command climate is clear. It is the character of our leaders that builds the climates of organizations. Therefore, when a select few like Knudsen, Salas, and Banuelos exhibit competence, integrity, security, and authenticity, their qualities create an environment that fosters trust, respect, and open communication.[17] This, in turn, fosters a positive command climate, driving our organizations forward and achieving our goals. Through positive and productive actions trustworthy leaders can build a culture of excellence that allow for trust and respect to grow, benefiting our soldiers and Nation. ∎

Notes

1. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2019), 5-2, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN18529-ADP_6-22-000-WEB-1.pdf.

2. Army Regulation (AR) 600-20, *Army Command Policy* (U.S. GPO, 2020), 2, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN32931-AR_600-20-004-WEB-7.pdf.

3. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 5-8.

4. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 5-9.

5. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 5-9.

6. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 5-9.

7. Tony Dungy, "4 Traits of a Trustworthy Leader," Global Leadership Network, 27 February 2019, https://globalleadership.org/articles/leading-yourself/4-traits-of-a-trustworthy-leader/.

8. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-11.

9. Dungy, "4 Traits of a Trustworthy Leader."

10. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 5-8.

11. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 2-8, 5-15–5-16, 6-5.

12. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 5-12.

13. AR 600-20, *Army Command Policy*, 67.

14. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 5-12.

15. AR 600-20, *Army Command Policy*, 67.

16. AR 600-20, *Army Command Policy*, 67.

17. AR 600-20, *Army Command Policy*, 23.