



# Engaged Leadership: Beating Duis at the Company Level

*By Master Sgt. James J. Martin*

Directorate of Public Works, Fort Gordon

**I** do not claim to have a cure-all, end-all approach to problems that plague our Army. But, in 19 years, I have seen some solutions that work and others that don't.

The Army has thrown everything, including money and handcuffs, at the problem of driving under the influence. However, we have only succeeded at creating a generation of risk-averse leaders whose fear of losing their jobs if a Soldier is charged with DUI directs their decision-making process.

The Army has tried myriad formulas. Yet counseling, safety briefs, taxi cards, courtesy patrols and unit shuttles have only put a small dent in the problem while allowing leaders to say, "I did everything I could," or "It wasn't my fault," as they wash their hands of the offending Soldier.

## **Going beyond the prescribed steps**

Here lies the problem: We have a generation of leaders who only follow prescribed steps to protect Soldiers from the perils of drugs and alcohol. But if a leader only follows a prescribed checklist, they are not thinking on their own, nor are they tailoring plans to protect their Soldiers. They are merely protecting their

careers.

The Army deals with thousands of DUI arrests every year. The company leadership is at the tip of the spear in the fight to reduce that number. The man-hours spent, from the platoon level all the way up to the brigade level, are innumerable. Yet imagine how good a unit could be if all those hours were instead spent planning training, mentoring Soldiers or building the team. The old saying, "First sergeants spend 90 percent of their time dealing with 10 percent of their Soldiers," is only as true as leaders allow it to be.

As a first sergeant, I did not allow myself to be seduced into that cycle. I knew that my Soldiers who did the right thing deserved more of my attention. I put in longer hours, came in early and left late. I refused to accept the fact that troubled Soldiers would dictate my time or attention.

Instead, to target the problem more aptly, we applied engaged leadership to the identified high-risk Soldiers who may have been more inclined to abuse drugs or drive drunk. It really is a simple concept that requires motivated and dedicated leaders that truly care about Soldiers and their organization.

Leaders should attack this problem the same way they defeat improvised explosive devices and insurgent cells: by attacking the network and winning hearts and minds. If a unit does nothing but walk up and down the road looking for IEDs (as a unit would deal with DUIs merely through counseling or safety briefs), they will locate most of them. But occasionally one will get by them and detonate on a Soldier, wounding or killing them (as a DUI or drug use would affect Soldiers in the unit). This is why we attack the network; we want to be “left of the boom.”

On the other hand, if a unit conducts route clearance, complemented by analysis and through other operations (such as combining DUI- and drug-related safety briefs and counseling with engaged leadership within a unit), the unit can get to the root causes of why and how IEDs are being emplaced, just as a unit can discover the root issues to DUIs and drug use.

Often, there is too much alcohol, drugs, time or money available to Soldiers. But if a Soldier has hobbies or interests — things they enjoy doing — they will spend money on those activities instead and have less money to spend in the clubs. Such hobbies and interests also take time to develop, and if the Soldier’s time is spent on hobbies, they are not in positions to incur a DUI. Therefore, to get “left of the boom,” engaged leaders must attack Soldiers’ overabundance of money and time before they are forced to do it through the military justice system.

## Engaging Soldiers

To get junior leaders to become engaged leaders, units need to have young sergeants who want to lead. If a unit has only E-5s and not sergeants, then they need to be retrained, reduced or relieved. Engaged leadership only works when sergeants and staff sergeants truly want to lead Soldiers.

Why do we discourage leaders and Soldiers from spending time together off duty? This is another speed bump in the way of becoming engaged. A unit should want Soldiers and leaders to spend time together outside of work. But, it must first start with mature leaders who care about Soldiers and who want a cohesive team. The leader needs to understand how to accomplish this without blurring the lines of fraternization. This is a companywide effort, and if the entire organization is not focused on the same goal, it will not work.

Like many leaders, I have often asked myself, “What else can I do?” I decided to target the problem the same way that I have taught targeting to dozens of company intelligence support teams as an observer-controller/trainer.

Using this framework, I attacked the problem by going after the Soldiers’ time and money — not by arbitrarily *taking* it from them, but by *giving* them something else to do on the weekends. Again, the more time and

money Soldiers spend on worthwhile pursuits, the less time they will have for the bars or sitting alone in a dark room with a bottle.

Now, before I figured out how to get this time *from* the Soldiers, I needed to give them more time first. I know this sounds backwards, but it is true.

I absolutely deplore Soldiers sitting around doing nothing in the motor pool or in the back of the company. If Soldiers are done working and all tasks have been completed, then they should have no reason to wait around. Soldiers who are happy about getting off at a decent time are more likely to stay out of trouble, especially when they know being released early depends on it.

This helps in another way. The Soldiers from other companies see this and tell my Soldiers that they want to be part of their company, which can only serve to build esprit de corps. Every Soldier is proud to be in the company that the rest of the battalion wishes they were a part of. Thus, *esprit de corps* builds a more disciplined unit. So to reiterate: To get Soldiers’ time, give them time.

## Giving Soldiers something to do

As a senior NCO new to the organization, one of my first priorities was to walk through the barracks. It gave me the chance to look each of the Soldiers in the eye as they stood tall outside their rooms. I asked them all the normal questions — about home, family, what they did with their time off. The more rooms I looked at, the more a pattern started to emerge. I noticed that Soldiers had lying around unused fishing rods, remote control helicopters, paintball equipment, musical instruments and so on. These items revealed activities the Soldier participated in before joining the Army but did not do now.

There were several excuses why, but mostly it boiled down to the Soldier not having enough money, not having any idea where to go or not having anyone to do it with. These were all problems I could help with.

My fix for “I don’t know where to go” was to engage the company Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers representative and figure out the status of our BOSS program. Well, we were broken. We had the obligatory fliers up and met the minimum requirements, but that just does not work. I “encouraged” my BOSS rep to do his research, and on Thursday mornings at formation, he began briefing the entire company on events in the surrounding area for the following week — festivals, concerts, drag races, BOSS trips, dinner theater, anything that single or married Soldiers and family members could attend. It was briefed far enough ahead of time that Soldiers could talk about it at work and form groups to go places.

I could not have predicted how effective this ended up being, and it required little to no resources. I counted on my BOSS rep for a few things. I had him coordinate a company visit to the outdoor recreation rental facility

and made it the place of duty for all Soldiers one afternoon. The Morale, Welfare and Recreation folks were great and gave us a tour showing the Soldiers how to rent and use equipment. After the visit, we had many Soldiers that wanted to rent boats but did not have the proper license or training. That was another easy problem to fix without many resources needed.

I started a boating mentorship class. For a week after work, a few trained NCOs and I offered classes at the company, giving Soldiers blocks of instruction on safe boating and the rules of the water. The licensing part was completed online with direct mentorship from leaders. The last part of the rental requirement was a hands-on test at the marina. We all met at the company on a Saturday morning and carpooled out to the marina. Afterward, I had a half-dozen Soldiers properly trained in boat safety — Soldiers who were able to take other Soldiers to the lake and enjoy a day boating with no alcohol involved. Besides, a Soldier who is going to get up early and go to the lake with their friends is most likely not at the club until 3 a.m. the previous night.

### **Good activities replacing the bad**

This theme slowly caught on throughout the company, and soon everyone was participating in activities. The company hosted a battalion fishing tournament. The MWR outdoor recreation site rented out every boat it had, the Family Readiness Group was onsite cooking and kids played at the beach while the Soldiers fished. Soldiers who had never fished a day in their lives bought \$10 fishing rods and came out to see what it was all about. Through engaged leadership, Soldiers were introduced to new, wholesome methods to occupy their time.

As an avid competitive archer and bow hunter, I was able to take Soldiers to the on-post archery range and teach them to shoot a bow. This was such a huge success that eight Soldiers immediately purchased their own archery equipment and started entering competitions. And every dollar spent on this new hobby was money not spent on alcohol or in the club.

Similarly, figuring out all the rules for hunting on a military installation can be a little intimidating. So several of the experienced hunters were able to guide Soldiers through the process — Soldiers that would never have hunted if not for some mentoring. The importance of Soldiers learning to stalk through the woods instead of spending all night in a club cannot be overstated. Yet all of this could not have been accomplished without leaders identifying the interests of their subordinates and mentoring them. Finding ways for them to spend their time and money essentially becomes just the cost of doing business.

These few examples were just the beginning. It spread from there as Soldiers came up with their own ideas and banded together to try new things. One Soldier coordi-

nated a handgun safety class while another took Soldiers to the coast to catch crabs. Soldiers were traveling together and volunteering together. Some coached youth basketball while other Soldiers coached youth soccer. These types of things helped give the Soldiers a sense of purpose, and we made sure they were rewarded with the appropriate acknowledgement and awards. As the rewards caught on, soon other Soldiers wanted to be recognized, and volunteering and community outreach spread as more joined in.

### **Creating unit pride**

All of these things made a name for us, and before long, the company was known all over post — and not for frequent appearances in the police blotter, either. As a company, we competed in MWR events, supported charities on- and off-post and participated in community events as a team. People wanted to be in our organization, and again that added to the unit's pride.

But this alone cannot be the whole source of a unit's pride. The majority must come from job performance. There is a delicate balance here, and if it is not struck, it is easy to create a lazy company that goes home early or that only does well from time to time. The company must become proficient in their field. They must train hard and finish strong. The company needs to become known as the example of excellence within the battalion.

Creating pride in a unit is something that is frequently talked about but never really followed up on. But I wanted us to take it to the next level. We wanted to create Soldiers who held their heads up high and bragged about their unit. Soldiers who are part of a unit like that do not want to be the individual who soils the company's name by smearing it on the blotter. They may not fear the punishment, but they are deathly afraid of the shame they would bring to their unit. This creates an environment where Soldiers truly look out for each other. They stop their peers before they do something stupid.

Showing Soldiers this much attention will leave little doubt that they are truly cared for. In exchange, they will respond with tremendous effort. If Soldiers are not kept sitting around aimlessly waiting for the end of the day, when the time comes for them to work late, they will be less likely to complain. They will understand that, if they have to work late, it must be something important.

### **How it all can reduce DUIs**

While these digressions may seem like boastful forays off the track, they are an integral piece of the puzzle that led to the company's success in beating DUIs. I will not say we did not have problems, because we did. In almost three years, I went to the Military Police station eight times. For some that may seem like a lot, but for an all-male combat arms company, it was rather exceptional.

I should clarify that I was not trying to keep the

Soldier from the bar completely. Rather, it was my intent to get them out of the bar before getting so drunk that mistakes happen. I am a realist. Soldiers are going to go out, and they may meet some nice people early on in the night. But nothing good has ever come from a Soldier staying at the bar all night long.

I have heard, "We can't do that in my unit" for whatever reason. But I would argue that these ideas can be implemented in any unit at anytime. Our unit went through each phase of the Army Force Generation cycle — from the training and preparation for deployment, to deploying and ultimately to the reset phase. Yet in each stage, we succeeded through all the hard times. I can attest that some times were definitely harder than others, but when your Soldiers and your unit are your top priority, it is all worth it.

Just as we do on the battlefield in each phase of the life cycle, Soldiers are owed leaders who are willing to attack the root cause of threats to get "left of the boom." Leaders must get Soldiers involved in other activities

through engaged leadership. Leaders must actually get to know their Soldiers, rather than just reciting their intention to in our creeds. NCOs need to know not simple data like Soldiers' kids' birthdays, but what really makes their Soldiers tick and what their interests are. Leaders need to show Soldiers how to get out of their rooms and how to get out of the clubs on a path that veers away from alcohol and drugs.

The culture of paperwork leadership and checking the blocks needs to be changed. Senior leaders must mentor junior leaders' involvement in the day-to-day life of their Soldiers. NCOs should train Soldiers hard, be fair, reward them properly, and above all care genuinely. The rest will come easy.

*Master Sgt. James J. Martin is currently the Directorate of Public Works sergeant major at Fort Gordon, Ga. His previous assignment was as first sergeant of B Troop, 3rd Battalion, 89th Cavalry Regiment, 4th Brigade, 10th Mountain Division. In his 19-year Army career, he has deployed to Macedonia, Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan.*



<https://www.armypress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

