



Bravo Battery, 1st Battalion, 94th Field Artillery Regiment (FAR) stands proud after completing "Operation Train the Dogs," a three-day team building field exercise that emphasized warrior tasks and battle drills. (Photo courtesy of 1st Battalion, 94th Field Artillery Regiment)

# Creating a Culture of Excellence

## Incentive-Based Leadership

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Napoleon astutely claimed that he could conquer the world if he had enough ribbons to place on his Soldiers' tunics.<sup>1</sup> The Army echoes Napoleon's thoughts on extrinsic motivation and the effect rewards have on individual and group performance. Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Leader Development* states, "... rewards relate closely to motivation and morale and can make an organization a place where its members strive to achieve results."<sup>2</sup> With the shift to sustain readiness, and advancements in technology for tracking training, the Army has become more focused on unit readiness statistics. The problem is that the emphasis on statistics-based requirements have fostered leadership styles that create a perception of success by the production of short-term

results through compliance. With readiness being the Army's top priority, leaders must find ways to encourage Soldiers to strive for excellence.

Leadership styles that utilize positive reinforcement through incentivizing success, empower units to achieve immediate results while also creating a culture of excellence. This article is based on the experiences and lessons learned from the command team of Bravo Battery "Bulldogs," 1st Battalion, 94th Field Artillery Regiment (FAR) from February through December 2018. It reviews the leadership challenges associated with the current operating environment of the Army and outlines the incentive program utilized by the battery.

## The Operating Environment

The large amount of required training in the Army today is heavily documented and widely discussed. One of the most prominent papers on the topic, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession*, is required reading in many units. The authors, Leonard Wong and Stephen Ger- ras, point out that Army systems have forced commanders to lie about readiness. They explain how this creates a larger problem in the force, "...many Army officers, after repeated exposure to the overwhelming demands and the associated need to put their honor on the line to verify compliance, have become ethically numb."<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to counter this demand, many junior officers have become task-oriented. To be "green" on a slide and current in the Digital Training Management System (DTMS) are seen as easy keys to success, but often at a cost.

Advancements in technology, including DTMS, make it feasible for a higher headquarters to pull up-to-date statistics on fitness, marksmanship, and mandatory training outlined in Army Regulation (AR) 350-1, *Army Training and Leader Development*. The ability of a higher headquarters to pull this information puts pressure on leaders to ensure the rapid improvement of readiness-based statistics to avoid the perception of mission failure. Technological advances not only affect the relationship with higher headquarters, they also give power to Soldiers.

The book *Radical Inclusion*, written by Ori Brafman and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey, focuses on achieving unit buy-in through controlling the narrative, while acknowledging the challenges that cell phones and social media create. In it, the authors state, "The things that allow people to become more informed and more connected...are the same things that allow them to choose what they want to know, to block out what they do not, to avoid personal contact, and to be recruited for causes good and bad."<sup>4</sup> The narrative which drives the culture in an organization has never been easier for Soldiers to influence as text messages and social media posts travel faster than any battlefield circulation.

Whether positive or negative, day-to-day decisions have effects on the motivational climate of an organization. In the article, "Carrot or Stick Approach," business coach Ana Antunes da Silva notes the carrot and stick idiom, "...refers to the old story that asserts to influence a donkey to pull a cart you would dangle a carrot in front of him or hit him with a stick from behind. The result is the same; the horse [donkey] moves forward."<sup>5</sup> Army regulations utilize the stick; failure of task X will result in punishment Y. A leader can make a small change to the narrative that can influence a Soldier's perception while still achieving results. Analyzing three common leadership responses to a simple requirement from a higher headquarters demonstrates how decisions can affect the narrative: ensuring everyone is complete with a required online training task before the close of business.

For example, completion of task X is our main focus today and:

- No one in the unit goes home today until everyone has completed the task.
- Anyone who does not complete the task will stay late tonight.
- Anyone who completes the task can go home after lunch.

All three methods lead to task completion. Methods A and B focus on the task itself and are examples of the "stick." Method A resorts to group punishment and Method B utilizes negative reinforcement. Jennifer Dubow, a business transformation leader at IBM, explains in her article "Balancing 'the Carrot and the Stick' In Leadership" that, "Some people rely on 'The Stick' as their 'go to' motivation tactic. It's in their comfort zone, and this approach can be a faster way to get a reaction out of your employees, though not necessarily an enduring change to their behavior."<sup>6</sup> The focus of Method C is rewarding the execution of the task. Early release from work is the *carrot* in this instance. Ultimately, leaders must find a balance between the carrot and the stick in order to breed excellence. The true challenge of great leadership is to inspire Soldiers to want to excel, not simply demanding excellence through rank and punishments.

## The Bulldog Incentive Program

In an attempt to improve the unit culture, the "Bulldog" command team created a comprehensive plan to inspire their Soldiers to seek excellence. The program recognizes success, and rewards both individuals and groups for going beyond standard Army requirements in order to promote a positive culture across the entire unit. The program is continually evolving based on quarterly feedback from Soldiers of all ranks and focuses on four pillars: fitness, academics, marksmanship, and performance. For a Soldier to be eligible for the incentives they must not be flagged, be current on Army Regulation 350-1 mandatory training, and be qualified on their assigned weapon.

### 1. Fitness

In a 2014 commencement speech to the University of Texas, retired Admiral William H. McCraven discussed how making one's bed is the first step to changing the world. "If you make your bed every morning you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride, and it will encourage you to do another task and another and another."<sup>7</sup> The Army starts every day with physical readiness training (PRT), providing a venue for Soldiers to push themselves to excel, and to be acknowledged for their hard work.



The I Corp's Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) standard for Soldiers is to earn a cumulative score of 250 points and achieve at least eighty points in each event. To meet this objective, the battery created an incentive which allows Soldiers who meet the I Corp's standard to instead report to work at 9 a.m. on Fridays. What we discovered once we put our program in motion, was that Soldiers who were provided time off from PRT often utilized it for physical training anyway. Weightlifting at the gym and conducting offsite trail runs became the norm for Soldiers who previously did not elect to exercise on their own. This fitness-based incentive also allowed room for a dedicated day of the week in which a Soldier could take his or her time with their significant other in the morning and, for those applicable, extra time to spend with their kids. Soldiers in the battery acted as a positive "peer pressure" group, holding each other accountable and challenging their peers to achieve the reward.

A second incentive that emphasizes group performance allows all Soldiers the opportunity to contribute to a platoon reward. Platoons able to achieve a collective score of 250 or higher are allowed to conduct sports and off-site PRT as a platoon once a month. This incentive brings platoons together to help any individual who struggles and challenges high performers to keep pushing themselves, as increasing any individual score raises the group average. These incentives created immediate results, and the battery APFT average went up 32 points in six months.



Several examples of books from the Bulldog Library. (Photo courtesy of 1st Battalion, 94th Field Artillery Regiment, edited by the NCO Journal)

## 2. Academic

Basic reading comprehension is imperative for leaders in the military. Recently, the Army has recognized the importance of writing in the noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps and has begun an overhaul of the NCO

professional development schools. A recent article in the *NCO Journal* about the importance of writing explains, "Writing is now, more than ever, a core component in NCOs' weekly responsibilities. The ability to effectively articulate your thoughts and verbal words into writing can ensure that you are able to establish your professionalism and may help you advance through the ranks."<sup>8</sup> The NCO professional development schools are challenging students to write, but there is little emphasis at the unit level to prepare them for these schools.

The battery "Leaders are Readers" program provides an incentive for Soldiers who read a book of their choosing from any commander's recommended reading list. Soldiers must provide a memorandum, in accordance with AR 25-50, *Preparing and Managing Correspondence*, outlining what the book was about to earn a three-day pass.<sup>9</sup> The battery leadership loans out copies of any book on the battery list, and upon completion of the book the Soldier is given the opportunity for one-on-one counseling with the commander to discuss their thoughts. Books on the battery list are diverse and train Soldiers to learn lessons equally from both fiction and history with books such as: *Ender's Game*, *I am Legend*, *Forever War*, and *Gates of Fire*. Gaining knowledge on properly formatting Army documents and increasing the ability of individuals to think critically vastly improves the ability of the unit to perform mission command.

## 3. Marksmanship

I Corps stresses Soldiers qualifying as first-time sharpshooters on their primary weapon. Yet most Soldiers will only have an opportunity to qualify on their M4 rifle every 8-12 months. Marksmanship is a perishable skill set, and simulation training provides realistic application and refinement of the skill. To provide recurring opportunities to shoot, the battery created monthly training utilizing the Engagement Skills Trainer (EST) and the Reconfigurable Vehicle Tactical Trainer (RVTT).

To motivate Soldiers to take advantage of these training opportunities, and become more proficient marksmen, the battery incentivized being a first-time sharpshooter with a three-day pass. Currently, the emphasis is on primary weapons. However, the battery is looking to expand the incentives in such a way as to reward Soldiers who are proficient with numerous weapons, because in a decisive engagement, any Soldier may need to employ a variety of weapon systems. This incentive creates redundancies on qualified shooters for the crew-served weapon systems as well as motivates Soldiers to become familiar with all the weapons in the battery.

## 4. Performance

The Army is a results-based organization. The final pillar in the Bulldog Incentive Program revolves around outstanding overall performance. *Forbes* recently published an article outlining tips for introducing

non-compensation based incentives. A key takeaway from this article is the importance of utilizing rewards to affect emotional health. “The greatest incentive that is both sustainable and economical for a large business is positive recognition.”<sup>10</sup> Following this line of thought, the battery created a nomination process for a “Bulldog of the Week.” The incentive recognizes Soldiers whose contributions make a direct impact on the unit and who were nominated by either their platoon leadership or other Soldiers in the battery. The awarded Soldier is recognized at the Friday closeout formation and provided a parking spot next to the command team for the following week.

The NCO Corps utilizes boards for both promotion and recognizing excellence. Additionally, Soldiers who successfully represent the battery in boards also receive rewards as part of the incentive program. The incentive for winning Soldier of the Month is a three-day pass. As the difficulty of the board increases, so does the number of people the incentive affects. The Soldier of the Quarter earns a three-day pass for the victor’s section while the Soldier of the Year earns a three-day pass for the entire platoon. The progression teaches Soldiers their hard work is recognized, and directly affects the Soldiers around them. This method of recognition breeds a team-based atmosphere as Soldiers encourage others in their section to succeed.



U.S. Army Spc. Brandon Smith was recognized as the “Bulldog of the Week” and awarded a reserved parking spot for winning the 17th Field Artillery Brigade Soldier of the Year Competition. (Photo courtesy of 1st Battalion, 94th Field Artillery Regiment)



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Stephen J. Gore from Bravo Battery, 1st Battalion, 94th Field Artillery Regiment earned the title of Distinguished Honor Graduate for Multiple Launch Rocket System Platoon Sergeant Senior Leader Course 002-18. (Photo courtesy of 1st Battalion, 94th Field Artillery Regiment)

## Conclusion

Positive reinforcement creates immediate results when the reward is of value to an individual. Jennifer Dubaw concludes that, “Rewards and recognition programs, when executed well, are effective in taking advantage of [the] principles of human behavior and psychology to create the desired change in behavior.”<sup>11</sup>

The Army is a results-based organization, and many leadership styles focus on producing results. The goal of the *Bulldog Incentive Program* is not to simply ensure tasks are accomplished, but to utilize extrinsic rewards to spark an intrinsic drive which changes the overall culture. The current operating environment demands leaders who can achieve results but does little to ensure the positive growth of the unit in the process. Shifting this focus to the individual Soldier, instead of the task they complete, fosters a climate of recognizing achievements.

The *Bulldog Incentive Program* has produced immediate results in fitness, mandatory training, and marksmanship. Beyond the tangible effects of the program, the shift to a culture of excellence has created a change in behavior across the battery. In the past 10 months there have been zero drug or alcohol incidents, zero Soldiers admitted for suicide ideations or attempts, and a dramatic reduction in Non-Judicial Punishments. Individuals now work together to excel.

The battery has produced a Soldier of the Year, numerous Soldiers of the Month and Quarter, and Honor Graduates at the Basic, Advanced, and Senior Leader Courses. Individual achievement begets group success and creates an environment that expects excellence. Leaders who incentivize accomplishments not only create a high-performing results-based organization, but foster a culture of excellence. ■

## Notes

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