



Soldiers of 6th Squadron, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division carry a log of wood with their Canadian and Polish counterparts during a spur ride in Yavoriv, Ukraine, September 28, 2016. The 6-8 CAV is deployed to Ukraine in support of the Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine. JMTG-U focuses on building a sustainable and enduring training capacity and capability within the Ukrainian land forces. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. John Onuoha)

# Fighting Conventional Wisdom

## Leadership is a Relationship

*By Command Sgt. Maj. Shawn F. Carns*

School for Command Preparation, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

**W**ith hindsight 20/20, I now realize that when I was a newly-promoted 22-year-old noncommissioned officer (NCO), I didn't have a clue about real leadership. Sure, I knew leadership's definition from studying for boards and the Primary Leadership Development Course (now called Basic Leadership Course/BLC), but like most NCOs and officers, I mimicked what I had witnessed firsthand as I assumed that was how things were supposed to be done.

In truth, I wasn't a leader. I was just rude and uncaring. I was referred to as the "Black Death" by my unit and I was naive enough to think that was a compliment. When Soldiers saw me coming, they would run in the

opposite direction, and I thought that meant I was doing something right.

As a brand new leader, I fully understood—and leveraged—positional power to rigidly enforce standards and discipline. Using my iron fist, I had the most disciplined team and squad in our company. However, I was marginally effective as a leader because I didn't have any developmental relationships. I didn't truly care about any of my Soldiers beyond their discipline, and they didn't truly care about me since I was just someone to avoid at all costs.

I didn't understand the full dynamics of leadership until I became a platoon sergeant. It took me over a decade to realize that leadership isn't about screaming and cruelty.

It's about forging relationships and trust with those around you. It's about mentoring, and being mentored.

My understanding of leadership wasn't developed by accident, nor was it an overnight process. As a young platoon sergeant, I was privileged to have three great squad leaders (Staff Sgt. Stedelin, Staff Sgt. Shackleton, and Staff Sgt. Fendley) who assisted my personal growth. I owe these three men an unpayable debt for teaching me that leadership is a relationship grounded in trust, and at its core, it's a connection between a leader and follower.

A great leader tries to build lasting relationships that survive beyond just a deployment or rotation. They still maintain high standards, but their subordinates accomplish the mission out of love and respect, not fear. In order to do that, we must recognize the value of a positive culture, and outline the steps to building more of it within the Army.

## Real Leadership

Leadership is not built in a day. It's built over time using experience and education. According to the authors Capodagli and Jackson in their book *The Disney Way*, (2016), "Leadership is an ability to establish and manage an environment of mutual respect and trust which motivates teams and individuals to achieve long-term goals" (p. 77). Disney is a successful company in a high stress industry. Their management principles are proven to be capable of building a positive culture that generates results.

The following benefits are from Alan Kohll's 2018 *Forbes* article about building a positive company culture in the workplace. Respecting your Soldiers can improve the following for your unit:

- Recruitment (Get the best Soldiers on your team)
- Loyalty (Your Soldiers will put the mission's needs above their own if they feel respected)
- Job Satisfaction (Soldiers that love their job and unit will enjoy coming to work)
- Collaboration (Soldiers that feel valued are more likely to work together to form solutions to problems)
- Work Performance (Valued Soldiers are more motivated and this has been linked to higher rates of productivity)
- Employee Morale (Positivity is linked to higher morale)
- Less Stress (Stress can be operationally dependent, but in garrison, respected Soldiers are linked to improved health and work performance)



Command Sergeant Major of U.S. Army Central, Joseph C. Cornelison, speaks to Soldiers with 1-62 Air Defense Artillery during a site visit to Camp Buehring, Kuwait, May 12, 2018. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Thomas X. Crough, USARCENT PAO)

## Definition of Leadership

Transforming Army leadership from the days of screaming, to the new way of caring, begins by defining the role and relationship of a leader in the U.S. Army. According to *ADRP 6-22: Army Leadership* (2012), "Leadership is the process of influencing by providing purpose, direction and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization" (Department of the Army, p. 1-1). And while that is a standard doctrinal definition, it is also a doable checklist. While NCOs can't simply check a *forming relationships with subordinates and higher-ups* block, they can schedule time to meet with their Soldiers in order to open the doors of communication and start building a foundation of trust.

For example, when I was a battalion command sergeant major, I'd walk down to the company central operating facility, sit down with Soldiers, and socialize. There was no agenda or desire to enforce discipline. It was simply a chance for Soldiers to talk, about their issues, military or otherwise. These sit downs assisted me in receiving feedback about the organization from their level (ground truth). It also helped form a relationship between me and the Soldiers, which allowed the opportunity to mentor and develop their professional growth all in one sitting (as others had done for me).

I'd schedule these sit downs once a week with a different company of Soldiers each time. A single conversation, or single event, is not likely to change a life, but building a relationship can change one's attitude, behaviors, and habits. This is especially true if they feel valued and are mentored towards the path to promotion and becoming leaders themselves.

## Influence

Relationships are an emotional attachment that foster a shared understanding and a care for one another during often complex situations. They are built off



U.S. Army Reserve Sgt. Richard Washburn shows Cadet Sheri Dyana Ortiz how to conduct a maintenance inspection on a M1097 Hight Mobility Multipurpose Vehicle on October 13, 2018, at Corpus Christi, Texas. Washburn and Ortiz, along with other Soldiers assigned to 211th Regional Support Group, prepared the unit's vehicles for future training missions. (U.S. Army photo by Maj. Tomas Piernicky, 4th Sustainment Command)

of trust, and trust leads to influence. The Army defines *influence* as "relationships where leaders build positive rapport and a relationship of mutual trust, making followers more willing to support requests" (Department of the Army, 2012, p. 6-2). If there isn't trust in a team, then there isn't a team. It's just random people trying to work together on a task.

The relationships with a foundational faith between leaders and followers are crucial to any organization. They connect us with other personnel in the team beyond just a morning briefing. According to John Maxwell (2007), "Systems and processes can do only so much. To move people in a new direction, you need influence" (p. 14). And influence can only be established after a deep connection is established that revolves around reliability, trust, and consistency.

Jayson DeMers (2015) describes seven ways to build influence within the workplace. These principles apply just as easy to the military as they do the business world:

1. Build Trust With Your Co-Workers (Soldiers)
2. Cultivate Reliability Through Consistency
3. Be Assertive, Not Aggressive
4. Be Flexible
5. Be Personal
6. Focus on Actions Rather Than Argument
7. Listen to Others

## Conclusion

My *Black Death* days are behind me and I have no desire to revisit them. That style of punishment-oriented thinking is a relic from the past and is extremely short-sighted and not worthy of a leader who wants to make a meaningful impact on the Army. Finding that line between discipline and support can not only positively affect a squad, but it can change the culture of an entire unit.

Yelling at people is easy. Caring for and mentoring others is hard. As a United States Soldier and NCO, I always choose the hard path. The right path. The path where I can make a real and lasting difference. ■

---

## References

- Capodagli, B. & Jackson, L. (2016). *The Disney Way*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill
- DeMers, J. (2015, January 15). 7 ways to build influence in the workplace. *Inc.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.inc.com/jayson-demers/7-ways-to-build-influence-in-the-workplace.html>
- Headquarters, Department of the Army (2012). *ADRP 6-22: Army Leadership*. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army.
- Kohl, A. (2018, August 14). How to build a positive company culture. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alankohl/2018/08/14/how-to-build-a-positive-company-culture/#1797b49249b5>
- Maxwell, J. (2007). *The 21 irrefutable laws of leadership*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc.

---

**Command Sgt. Maj. Shawn Carns** is an infantryman in the United States Army. He is currently serving as the Command Sergeant Major Development Program Lead (CSMDP) & Brigade CSMDP Facilitator at the School for Command Preparation, Fort Leavenworth, Kan. He previously served as the command sergeant major at JTF-B in Honduras responsible for the 7-country Joint Operations Area (JOA) in Central America.

---



<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.

