

Take care of Soldiers by providing early developmental
opportunities

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A U.S. Army drill sergeant corrects a recruit during her first day of training at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., Jan. 31, 2017. Referred to as "Day Zero" this marks the beginning of the recruit's journey through Basic Combat Training, where she will transition from a civilian to a Soldier. (U.S. Army photo by Stephen Standifird)

Take care of Soldiers by providing early developmental opportunities

For United States Army leaders and especially noncommissioned officers, the phrase "Taking care of Soldiers" is a widely heard common expression. These words are often uttered by senior enlisted leaders including Sergeant Major of the Army Dan Dailey during many of his town halls across Army installations. But what does that eponymous phrase mean?

This expression is also one of the key themes in the NCO Creed as it states "I know my Soldiers and I will always place their needs above my own." The essence of the NCO is to make sure Soldiers under their care have all the necessary resources to get the job done.

For the most part, NCOs do a fantastic job "taking care of their Soldiers." They concern themselves with the morale and welfare of their Soldiers. They reward them when deserved and correct when warranted. Feedback is prompt and constructive. However, the best way to really "take care of Soldiers" is by giving them your trust, and the opportunity to grow and learn whenever possible.

Trusting the Millennial and Z Generation

Taking care of Soldiers begins with trusting our junior Soldiers, which are increasingly comprised of Millennials and Generation Z.

Millennials, also known as Generation Y, is the demographic cohort of those people born between 1980 and the mid-1990s. Today, millennials make up more than 75% of the U.S. Armed Forces according to a 2014 Defense Department report.¹ Older millennials, now in their early to mid 30's, joined the military in a post-September 11th world at the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism. The majority of their military experience consists of combat deployments to Afghanistan or Iraq. However, they lack leadership experience in garrison environments due to the increased deployment cycles. Home station time meant preparing for or returning from a deployment.

Generation Z members are just starting to enter our formations. Those born around 1995 and beyond are digital natives. Their characteristics include caring for others, being independent and open-minded and have an intense desire to succeed.² This generation of young Americans watched their parents struggle during the Great Recession of 2008-2009 impacting their worldview.

With such a large pool of our military force in these two demographics, it is time we place more trust in their abilities. Senior NCOs will continue to have a role in coaching, mentoring and teaching these young Soldiers, but need to give them the chance to show their worth. The millennial generation is a misunderstood group of young men and women who have been labeled various terms.³ Whether you agree or disagree, the one thing we can't deny is the intellect of our young people. This current generation is smarter and possess more classroom knowledge than previous generations.⁴ Let's use that to our advantage.

Empowering our young Soldiers to think of new concepts and ideas can only make our organizations better. Critical thinking skills do not magically appear with a certain rank. They emerge over time in response to challenges. Instead of allowing and embracing independent growth, leaders want to direct how to accomplish every task to the littlest detail. Fear of failure, which portrays them in a negative light, leads senior military leaders to become micromanagers. Leaders are keenly aware that failure of their Soldiers will be reflected on their evaluation report, which then impacts their promotion chances.

Depending on the circumstances, it should be acceptable for our subordinates to fail from time to time. If it is an honest mistake, leaders should accept it. People tend to learn from their mistakes. Famed author Roy H. Williams believes "A smart [person] makes a mistake, learns from it, and never makes that mistake again."⁵ Are we providing the opportunities for junior Soldiers to learn from their mistakes? Giving our Soldiers more room for error will provide results that just might surprise us. More importantly, this model prepares our junior Soldiers to become leaders when they put on those NCO stripes. This will be especially important as Generation Z grows in numbers in the years come. It will be the millennial generation who will train and mentor them.

For some senior NCOs, this sentiment may come with some cynicism. Many view the current crop of service members as a group who had it "easy." Cell phones at boot camp, use of "stress cards," and the classic line: "the military was harder when I was in" are just some of the things 'old-school' NCOs say.⁶ The irony is that some senior NCOs are millennials themselves.

A little generational rivalry is a good thing. Compare it to when your grandparents told you how they walked to school

uphill, both ways, in three feet of snow and against the wind. We rolled our eyes and may have even told them to "get with the times."

Sometimes this thinking can be problematic and keeps the Army mired in a time when junior enlisted were not expected to do more than execute orders. An example of this is the "be quiet and color" statement. Back in that day, junior Soldiers never asked "why" when they were ordered to do something. They just did it. Merely asking 'why' was downright disrespectful and probably resulted in push-ups. A millennial Soldier, however, seeks the root cause to better understand what he or she has been ordered to perform in order to make an impact.⁷ Doing something the way it has always been done is no longer acceptable. Understanding why a task is done and the context or decision-making process behind it helps junior Soldiers as they execute these tasks. If the context changes, they are able to adjust, rather than executing out of blind adherence to orders.

Change is the only constant in the Army. There is no question that technology and training advancements have improved training, which results in a better Soldier. For example, numerous lives have been saved by medical advancements and improvements in medical training. Instead of one field dressing

clipped to the Load-Bearing Vest, Soldiers carry an IFAK with tourniquet and emergency trauma dressing. Soldiers must quickly assess and render appropriate aid with the new materials. Understanding when to use each piece of equipment is important so mistakes are not made.

As we operate in a complex world, NCO expectations of their Soldiers must continue to adapt and progress to operate in a world of uncertainty. Young troopers will still make mistakes especially due to inexperience. NCOs can build a strong bond by correcting the mistake without belittling the individual Soldier or their generation. This in turn will help improve our Soldiers skill sets and ultimately instill trust in the next generation.

Put them out front

Technology is great and has done wonders to connect us globally. While the conveniences of modern technology allow us to immediately communicate via social media and text using abbreviations and emojis, younger generations are losing interpersonal skills.⁸ This is why it is so important for us as senior leaders to let them lead physical readiness training sessions and classroom instruction. Don't always rely on online training to get your quarterly or semi-annual training requirements completed. While it is convenient for an

individual, online training has also reduced the available opportunities for junior Soldiers to speak in front of large groups. It is quicker and easier for one hundred soldiers to listen to a block of instruction for thirty minutes than those same one hundred soldiers to complete online training on 20 computers.

In-person communication skills are noticeably lacking in Millennial Soldiers. Moving mandatory training from online to the physical world can and will afford junior Soldiers the ability to speak and perform in front of people. Soldiers build self-confidence and sharpen their social skills as they grow to become NCOs. Putting them in charge of classroom training or PT will also give our junior Soldiers the chance to learn how to properly plan training, conduct risk assessments and get training staffed and approved.

Shifting mandatory training and physical readiness training to junior Soldiers is not the only way to prepare them. Delegate tasks to them. Make them responsible for platoon-level tasks, and rotate them through the responsibilities. They must be empowered and not the scapegoat when something is wrong.

It could be as simple as placing a Soldier in charge of the platoon supply closet or as complex as a Soldier serving as the subject matter experts when cross-training within the platoon, company, or battalion. One could be the expert in communications, responsible for training their section. The opportunities are endless and only require a little creativity, and planning to ensure the training is conducted to standard.

Promoting Soldiers and broadening their skills

Are we giving them "true experience" before we send them to the board? All promotion orders include the phrased "professional excellence and demonstrated leadership potential." Time in service is typically viewed as an indicator of experience. Longer service, and thus more experience, is viewed as a positive. The blind faith placed in this belief though can lead to problems.

It is possible that a junior Soldier with less time in service has had more developmental experiences than a NCO with more time in service. Many junior troops learned important leadership lessons or skills because of the opportunities they were afforded. It is not the time in service that is important, but the sum of the experiences gained during the service. This is

something we need to take into consideration as we prep our Soldiers to go to a promotion board.

In addition to providing opportunities to broaden their junior Soldiers experience, NCOs should be deliberately sharing their experiences. Rotate people through positions annually, if possible. Selfishly, many leaders leave individuals in a certain position because they perform well. Some NCOs don't want to risk poor performance or a poor evaluation. The known performance is better than the unknown performance. This type of thinking can backfire because NCOs could be draining out their Soldiers and relying too much on the same people. Additionally, many junior Soldiers want to stay in one position and do one job. However, NCOs are charged with broadening their Soldiers skill sets and must get them out of their comfort zones.

Building the future

Tomorrow's generation of NCOs will be molded by the coaching and development provided by today's NCOs. Now is the time to pay it forward and give our Soldiers ample opportunities to shine.

"Taking care of Soldiers" goes beyond awards and time off. It is the mindset of building the next generation of leaders by instilling trust in their abilities and giving them a voice in a room full of noise. Help them build their reputation within the

platoon or section. The future and strength of the NCO Corps, the backbone of the Army, depends on it.

Endnotes

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