

Authentic NCOs: Honest with themselves and their Soldiers

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Three NCOs acting on behalf of NCOs of the past, present and future light three candles. The red candle represents valor, the white honor and integrity, and the blue vigilance. (U.S. Army photo by Meghan Portillo, NCO Journal)

From time to time the concept of "authenticity" emerges in any review of literature, especially since it was first used by Andrew Halpin in 1966. Authentic or genuine behavior is closely associated with an open-climate organization. In an open-climate organization, a leader's behavior is purposeful and real, while, as Halpin suggests, in a closed-climate organization behavior tends to be determined by role and appears almost ritualistic.

Research indicates leader authenticity involves three aspects of behavior:

- Accepting responsibility for one's actions, outcomes and mistakes.
- Being non-manipulative of subordinates.
- Demonstrating an expression of self over role.

Military and civilian research indicates that supervisors report greater satisfaction from their work when they are able to help their subordinates solve problems encountered in the work environment. Unfortunately, for whatever reason - inspection, training, details, etc. - they don't often experience the real lift that comes from helping their subordinates. The conditions that hamper NCOs in their work make it all the more imperative that you, the NCO, improve the quality of interaction with your Soldiers.

For some time the practice of supervision has focused on ways of observing, reporting and interpreting behavior of subordinates. This analytical approach to supervision represents only half the reality of being a supervisor. The whole includes the internal world - the feeling as well as the facts - of those you supervise.

By now, most of us have experienced an Army leadership course or two and probably a textbook or a civilian course on leadership. We've learned techniques and, while useful, these acquired skills overlook an important dimension of the NCO-subordinate relationship: namely, the feelings you experience as an NCO. This is the key to authenticity.

It has been our good fortune to receive an education in the application of behavioral principles to organizations. We've seen improvements in the quality of personal and organizational relationships. How? By being more authentic - and this is accomplished by becoming more aware of and responsive to your own needs.

By need we mean your ability to interact with your environment. Your internal mechanism lets you know what you need at a given moment. At times you will have to manipulate the environment to get what you need. But sometimes things don't go too well. You aren't able to satisfy your needs. A major contributor to this is the "shoulds" that pull you here and there. There aren't enough hours or days to do everything. If you are normal, you do one thing and feel guilty because you didn't do another. We believe the successful NCO is an authentic NCO who does not adopt a particular style or pattern of behavior.

So how do you acquire authenticity?

Authentic interaction between two people is characterized by a quality called contact. For contact to occur, each individual must establish and maintain contact with his or her personal feelings, needs and wants, and be willing to make these known. When contact exists, you'll know it right away. There will be liveliness, excitement, and presentness. Lack of contact is evident when the topic of conversation is other people or past and future events.

NCOs are aware that others don't welcome direct criticism of their duty performance, yet they feel a sense of duty to inform others of their obvious flaws.

Often, the NCO avoids this by any number of methods, and, call them what you may, the outcome will be the same: The subordinate will fail to understand exactly what you are criticizing. You also run the risk that your subordinates will be confused about how concerned they really ought to be with the problem and whether they are supposed to correct it.

There are no hard and fast rules governing exchanges between the NCO and the subordinate. The important thing to realize is that they will be more effective if they are authentic. A first step in becoming aware of your authentic feelings, needs and wants is to recognize the "shoulds" that prevent real contact. The following list is offered to help you develop authentic contact. It's adapted from Stanley Herman and Michael Korenich:

- Identify and list the most important "shoulds" about your duty.
- Describe what you would do if you could follow your natural inclinations, if you did not have that "should."
- Decide, as honestly as you can, where each of the "shoulds" originates, whether from your own superordinate, in service, textbooks, regulations, or even parents. Ask yourself to what extent each "should" is a real constraint, and to what extent it is self-imposed. Ask yourself, also, what specifically would happen if you failed to observe that "should."

This strategy for identifying your "shoulds" and your "wants" only begins to establish contact with others.

Authentic contact requires constant attention. You must always be aware of your inner feelings and the external environment, which includes the feelings of others as well as objective facts.

Think about contact by asking yourself three questions: What am I doing right now? What am I feeling right now? What do I really want right now from this situation?

As long as contact is maintained, the NCO should be prepared to accept responsibility for what he or she says, including the risk of offending or angering others. This does not mean running roughshod over the feelings of others or discarding empathy.

As an NCO you can be more authentic if you clearly identify and successfully satisfy your personal needs and wants with respect to others. You can accomplish this by increasing your awareness of what is happening "right now" both internally and externally, and then acting in an honest way that gets you what you want or need for that situation, and encouraging others to do the same.

An analysis of an authentic NCO can be found in Field Manual 22-100, *Factors of Leadership and Leadership Principles* (now FM 6-22, *Leader Development*). The main factor is communication as it applies to the authentic NCO. Several important principles apply to this factor:

- Know yourself and seek improvement.
- Seek responsibility; take responsibility for your actions; know your Soldiers.
- Look out for their well-being, just to name a few.

Whatever concept or technique used should help you gain access to Soldiers' motivation, dedication and competence.

As an NCO, you must know who you are, what you know and what you can do, so that you can be a better leader - one your Soldiers will always follow.