President Barack Obama presents former Staff Sgt. Ryan M. Pitts with the Medal of Honor at the White House in Washington, D.C., July 21, 2014. Pitts was awarded the Medal of Honor for the heroic actions he displayed during one of the bloodiest battles in Wanat, Afghanistan, July 13, 2008. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Steve Cortez)

Developing the Character of Army Professionals

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Character development for Army professionals has a subjective quality. Character is a broad topic encompassing an array of viewpoints based on multiple fields of study, as well as societal perspectives based on the history of warfare.

Character has taken on many definitions throughout Army doctrine publications and institutional concepts found on U.S. Army websites and training materials. They range from concepts such as a sense of purpose, virtues, and conscience, to the qualities that guide moral decision-making. The Center for Army Profession and Ethics defines character as "dedication and adherence to the *Army Ethic*, including *Army Values*, as consistently and faithfully demonstrated in decisions and actions."[1]

It may not seem considerably valuable to place much emphasis on character development. However, it is more crucial to troop morale and the overall perception of the Army than it might seem at first glance. There are many questions that need examination when considering character development. Although no single approach will solve the ongoing pursuit of creating a committed force, it is in our interest to provide Soldiers and leaders with tools to enable the ideal development of "character, competence, and commitment."[2]

This essay discusses the importance of character development, including its historical foundation in our initial pursuit of victory as a nation. In addition to historical foundations, this essay examines the fields that study the science of character and the factors that influence it. Finally, it covers the current approach of character development, along with implications for future methods to ensure the Army professional's continual improvement.

Professional Character

The mention of Army professional character invokes a certain mental image of honor and pride. The first things to come to mind for those of us who serve are the *Army Values*, the *Soldier's Creed*, or the *NCO Creed*. Each embodies highly regarded standards of conduct, memorized and learned with the intent to ingrain Army principles.

The *Army Ethic* is another guideline to motivate and inspire an obligation to "uphold the standards of the profession and adhere to its values."[3] It serves to define the character attributes of a trusted Army professional. First, upholding laws, having pride in serving, treating others with respect, and using discerning judgment to do what is right. Second, the competent professional is disciplined, courageous, and knowledgeable. Third, commitment includes being accountable for your behavior, maintaining preparedness, and developing trust.[4]

Why Character Development is Important

We have an obligation as a nation to "do the right thing," to have an unwavering sense of integrity when others do not. This obligation sets us apart from some adversaries who do not have a moral code, and in many cases, refuse to abide by international laws of war.

Insurgent groups have claimed moral righteousness based on religious extremism. The leaders of Syria, Russia, and Turkey have recently ignored rules of engagement that would spare civilian lives in the war-torn regions of Syria. When called upon to be accountable for their actions, they echo denial across the board, despite overwhelming evidence. This is not a new occurrence in history. Quite the contrary, it is the norm. A fighting force with moral and ethical standards of character is, however, essential to troop morale and a positive perception by the population.

History of Character Development

George Washington recognized early on how the character of individuals could determine the long-term outcome on the battlefield, "If … proper care and precaution are used … (having more regard to the characters of persons, than the number of men they can inlist [sic]) we should in a little time have an Army able to cope with any that can be opposed to it."[5]

This determination influenced our nation beyond the first battles for independence and served as a foundation for our military to this day. An Army that serves with honor and respect feels driven by its sense of pride and a moral obligation to be better than its enemies. Because of this, the "character of persons" Washington referred to is a strength that builds nations.

Foundations of Character

Recognizing the composition of character can help us determine a viable approach to character development. There is no single foundation for character building. It takes a multi-dimensional understanding of the biological, psychological, and sociological fields of study to determine the motivations behind group and individual character traits.[6]

These fields do not contradict each other. Although they differ in approach and focus, they complement the total understanding of this topic when combined into a comprehensive view of the cause for behaviors.[7] Whether a person's decision-making leads to productive or counterproductive character traits is determined by a combination of the factors discussed in the research of these fields.

Biopsychosocial Factors

When it comes to biological factors, we can start with inherited traits. It is not possible to change our genetic makeup. Any predispositions in character due to our genes can vary, as genes alone do not determine the complexity of an individual.

Another biological factor is age. Along with the physical changes that come with age, at different points in life, our level of maturity develops. Surely a person can mature faster, or never completely mature as an adult. One thing for certain, the brain will change with age, along with individual character.

Psychology also affects development throughout a person's lifespan. Virtues such as honesty and integrity are "derived from our formal and informal education, training, and experiences."[8] Formal experiences are what we learn at school, church, or in the home, while informal experiences are acquired through the broad social climate and cultural learning from TV and other media.

This brings us to the sociological factors that shape values and beliefs. The social environment of our upbringing influences what values and beliefs we cherish.

It is important to recognize every Soldier has different underlying factors that influence who they are in order to create an effective strategy for character development.

Character Development Strategy

The Character Development Project Team is part of the solution derived from the Army white paper, *Developing the Character of Trusted Army Professionals: Forging the Way Ahead*. It is comprised of all Army organizations and multi-disciplinary subject-matter experts within the Department of Defense.[9] This project created
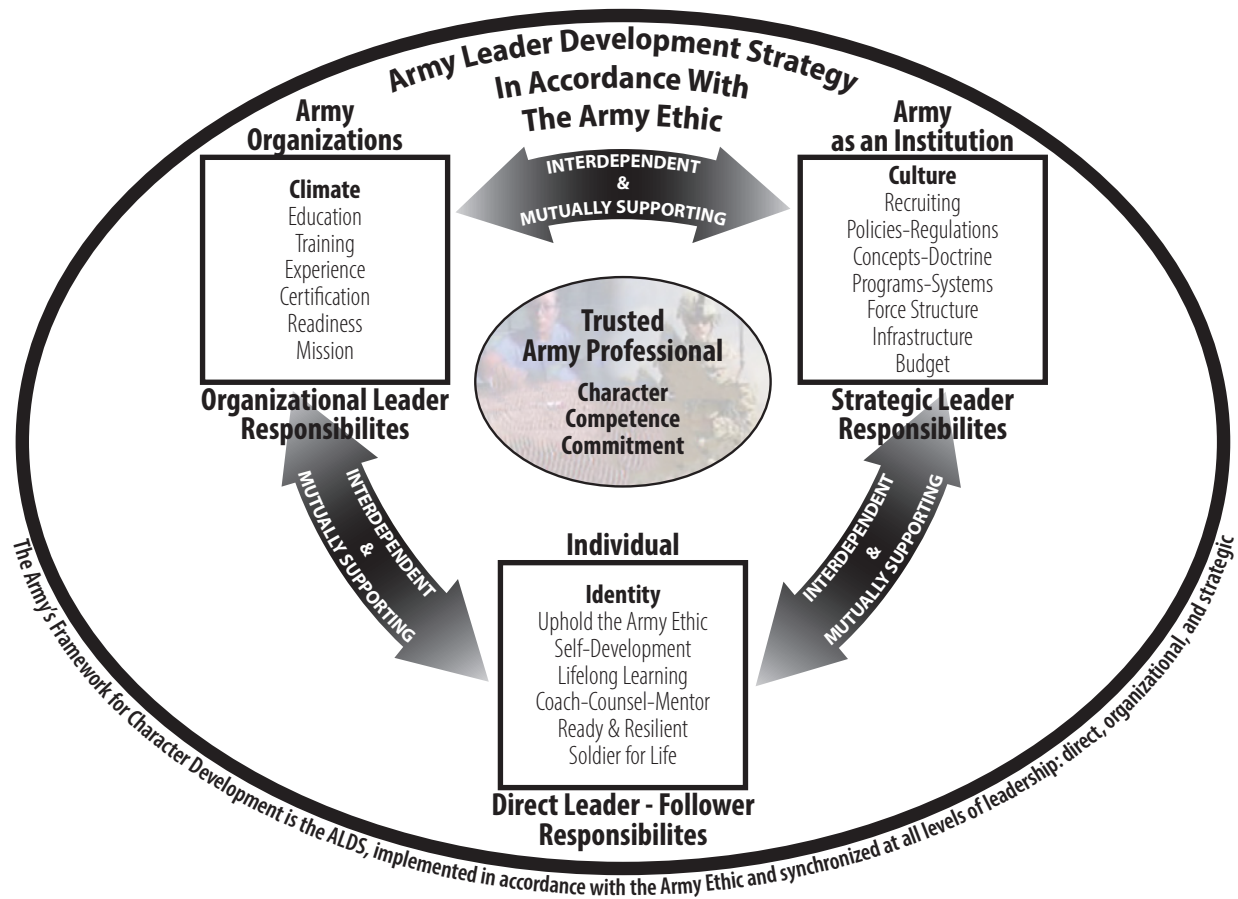
Figure from Army White Paper, *The Army's Framework for Character Development*.

the Army Leader Development Strategy's Framework for Character Development. It consists of three levels of leadership: direct, organizational, and strategic.

Starting at the individual level, it is the responsibility of Soldiers and their leaders to live The *Army Ethic*, develop themselves through lifelong learning, and maintain a resilient mindset. As mentors, leaders can instill values to live by to their subordinates.

At the organizational level, it is the responsibility of the company, battalion, and brigade leadership to foster a climate that enhances mutually supportive experiences for junior Soldiers. An environment that encourages character development in all aspects of readiness will ensure mission accomplishment.

Strategic level leadership carries the responsibility of developing doctrine and disseminating the concepts through policies founded on Army regulations and on-line infrastructure.[10]

Conclusion

The importance of Army professional character development cannot be overstated. It has been the foundation of Army ethical strategy since our first Commander-in-Chief recognized its value.

Modern strategies for character development implement biological, psychological, and sociological fields of study to define the details of a strong framework for the development of trusted Army professionals.

The framework outlines ethical responsibilities, beginning with the individual Soldier and ending with the Army as an institution. It illustrates how the Army ethic is interdependent on each level of leadership, as well as mutually supportive.

Developing our future with leaders of character, competence, and commitment will allow the Army to continue a tradition of professionalism and moral strength across the globe. ∎

Notes

1. Michael D. Lundy, The Army's Framework for Character Development, (West Point: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2017), 2.

2. Lundy, The Army's Framework, 1.

3. Raymond T. Odierno, The Army Ethic, (West Point: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2014).

4. Odierno, The Army Ethic.

5. Lundy, The Army's Framework, 1.

6. Lundy, The Army's Framework.

7. Lundy, The Army's Framework.

8. Lundy, The Army's Framework, 3.

9. Willard M. Burleson, Developing the Character of Trusted Army Professionals: Forging the Way Ahead,(West Point: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2016).

10. Lundy, The Army's Framework.

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