

Got Morale?

By 1st Sgt. Gloria Cain

Published in From One Leader to Another Volume II by the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in 2015

Nov. 22, 2017



Soldiers of A Company, 412th Aviation Support Battalion, 12th Combat Aviation Brigade conducted confidence course training as part of their pre-deployment training, April 27, 2012. The event also helped to foster camaraderie, boost morale and build esprit de corps among soldiers before their upcoming deployment to Afghanistan. (U.S. Army photo)

"It is not enough to fight. It is the spirit we bring to the fight that decides the issue. It is morale that wins the victory."

- General of the Army George C. Marshall

When someone talks about morale in the military, it is usually thought of in the light of the FMWR also known as Family, Morale, Welfare and Recreation program. This program began in earnest during World War I with the Salvation Army Sisters and Red Cross Volunteers helping Soldiers behind the lines. Due to funding, the program went away but then in 1940 it was reestablished under the name Special Services. The program had its ups and down but really stabilized and took on a prominent role in 1984 when it began providing and establishing different events and programs for Soldiers and their Families. To me this is only one small portion of building and maintaining morale in your unit.

The success of the unit relies on many elements, but this key element can make or break your company is morale. One way in which the morale of a unit can be determined is by the command climate survey, which is to be done annually or when you have a change of commander. Based on my years of experience, particularly as a first sergeant I have found that there are four main areas that I believe truly serve as the pillars of unit morale. They are leadership, fitness, FRG/relationships, and esprit de corps.

The command team relationship sets the tone for the company and is critical. My command sergeant major once told me that it is the first sergeant's responsibility to ensure that this relationship is solid; this is the spirit of the company. Enough said.

Besides that, the very first factor that affects the unit's morale is good or poor leadership! A Soldier wants to work for a leader that is trustworthy, cares about them, knows their job, is fair, has order and discipline, and gets their hands dirty with them. There can be no doubt, it can be hard to make the mission happen and take care of yours Soldiers. Coming up through the ranks, I displayed many types of leadership myself. At one time I was a complete jerk, and then during another period I was not assertive enough. Eventually, I was able to strike the right balance for me

personally so that I was able to accomplish the mission and genuinely care for my Soldiers. When I was a staff sergeant our unit welcomed a new first sergeant. He actually talked to me and our other Soldiers like we were humans; imagine that! He expected us to be proficient in and do our jobs, and for the first time in my career I felt like I could actually talk to the first sergeant. He treated me with respect. I tailored my leadership off of his example. As a first sergeant, I asked the Soldiers how their day was or how their family was as often as possible. It is amazing what you can find out by stopping a Soldier and asking a few questions. You can change their life without even realizing it. We all know that a Soldier could be stationed in the best or worst of areas, but it is really the unit leadership which will help shape the Soldiers determination as to how much they like the assignment. While leadership is a completely different topic and can be expounded on extensively, it is truly the foundation of morale.

Once you assess your leadership, both your Soldiers' and yourself, it is imperative that you set the tone for the unit by professionally developing your NCOs through a comprehensive NCO Development Program, desk side counseling and mentorship. This will truly heal wounds and build a strong, cohesive team.

How you begin your day sets the tone for the rest of the day and that should always begin with physical fitness. A healthy, fit Soldier is a happy Soldier. When I first took over one particular unit, I realized that we had entirely too many overweight and tired Soldiers with bad attitudes. I initiated counseling and paperwork to either entice the Soldiers to stay or leave. Most of them got in shape and stayed in the Army, but there were quite a few that we administratively separated. At the time, I had a company of over 350 Soldiers, so when I conducted monthly overweight counseling, I brought them all into a conference room. I discussed three things: exercise, diet, and rest, all of which are imperative to a healthy, fit Soldier. After the discussion, I would individually call them forward and review their packet to see if they had improved. If they improved, I congratulated them right there in front of everyone and told them how proud I was of their achievement. If they did not improve, I would have those Soldiers stay behind. I would then individually ask each Soldier what their diet, rest and exercise plan was like. After I figured out what was wrong, which it was usually rest and diet, I challenged and motivated them to excel. Throughout the month, I would periodically ask those Soldiers how their plan was working out for them. This let them know that I not only enforced the standard but that I also cared about them as well.

Now serving at an NCO academy, when a student fails the tape test I pull them to the side as often as possible and ask them if they have ever been counseled on nutrition. Most of them tell me no. Now this begs the question, is this true or are they just telling me this? I am not sure but what I do know is that the last five Soldiers that I have spoken to directly have all passed the tape test after a week. One Soldier lost 19 pounds in a week! If you don't think that they had an increased morale, you're crazy. I do recognize that this is a typical example and NOT necessarily a safe weight loss. Now your question might be, what did I tell them? I told them they need to get at least seven hours of sleep. Without rest your brain doesn't operate as well and your body doesn't recover like it should either. Then I challenge them to exercise an additional hour every day after class. The physical readiness training in the morning is not always enough to help someone who is out of shape get back into shape. Lastly, the number one cause of weight gain or not losing any weight is not eating or not eating right. A lot of Soldiers will say that they only eat once a day or little meals three times a day. I was told many times by one of my NCOs that you have to eat to lose weight. That just sounded ludicrous, until I decided to actually try it. Your metabolism slows down if you don't use it often. If you rarely eat, then your body goes into survival mode and starts storing food as fat instead of muscle.

The advice that I give is to eat a healthy proportionate breakfast an example of which might be egg whites, 1 cup of low fat yogurt, lean ham, 1 cup of skim milk and a handful of blueberries. There are many other examples in The Army Weight Management Guide. If an hour later they felt hungry, I told them to eat an apple, an orange, Clementine, grapes, celery, or carrots. If an hour later they were hungry again, eat another healthy snack. This is the body's way of saying, "Hey, I need energy and if you don't give it to me from food, I will pull the energy from your hard earned muscles." The body also needs the nutrients to feed your muscles. If your muscles do not get the nutrients, injuries will often occur. I liken this to the example of a dry sponge. If the sponge is dry and you try to twist it, it will tear, and break, but if it is moist it twists and turns easily. For lunch, I encourage a small portion of lean meat, fish, poultry, eggs along with fruits and vegetables. They can nibble on one or two snacks after lunch and then eat a healthy dinner. I tell the students that attend the NCOA that for the next week you cannot cheat on your diet. They must drink a lot of water daily (which every organ in your body must have water and needs a lot of it), no soda or alcohol. With that being said, usually after about one week if a Soldier does this they have more energy, they have lost fat and they are excited about their progress. In turn they become an active part of the team and the unit.

The last part of fitness worth mentioning is about being a drug free unit. Good Soldiers do not want to be affiliated or associated with a unit that has drug problems. Although, you may not be able to get them all, you can rid your organization of drug users while scaring away potential users. This is also a very vast subject and issue, but I believe it is necessary to mention a couple of points in regards to this goal. Make sure that you conduct training often. Make your leaders aware of common behaviors of drug users. For instance, 99 percent of the time the drug users I experienced in our organization had a filthy room or automobile. This was a common indicator of their indiscipline. Also, for new drug users, they would develop disciplinary problems that previously didn't exist; one very common thing was being late for formation or duty. The most common drugs abused in my company were alcohol, K-2 also known as spice, and oxycodone. Fit Soldiers are not doing drugs and want drug users out of their company. It is your duty to get them help and/or get them out of your formation and your Army. Once the commander and I really began placing emphasis on college enrollment our problems reduced tremendously. We went from having at a minimum of one DUI or positive drug urinalysis a month, to well over six months with no abuse. I would routinely bring a Soldier into my office and ask them what classes they were taking. When they gave me that blank look, I would let them know that I expected to see a tuition assistance form within a certain number of days. Believe it or not, some Soldiers had no idea how to even enroll. Even though I thought my PSGs were counseling, not all of them were making

sure their squad leaders were doing the right thing.

Another very, very important part of keeping high morale in your unit is the family readiness group and relationships. Yes, I said it - the FRG. Here is the deal, if mothers and fathers are happy, then the Soldier is usually happy. Having fun, team building events with the spouses, encouraging friendship, and finding someone that they can depend on when the Soldier is deployed or working late is key to the morale of your organization. It is very important that you have strong supportive and fun spousal interaction. Also, encourage relationship classes, especially for young couples and parents. When a family member is ill, a new baby arrives, or there is a death in a family it is important to let the family know that you are thinking of them. One of the lessons that I learned in my first few units was that I would buy a gift card and visit the new parents at the hospital. However, once my company became over 350 strong, I knew that I couldn't afford to do the same thing with three or four babies being born at a time, possibly in the same week. Instead our FRG would put together baby baskets and give them to the new mother. The problem was that I did not want to visit the hospital empty handed so I stopped visiting the hospital most of the time. I realize now how much better our relationship could have been if I had taken 20 minutes to see them in the hospital regardless of whether I brought a gift or not. Long story short, caring about the family, is caring about the Soldier. A Soldier wants to work for a leader that cares about them.

Lastly, esprit de corps in my opinion is the icing on the cake. When you have taken care of the mission and your Soldiers, the Soldiers take pride in and develop loyalty in their unit. They want to be a part of a team and they are proud to let people know once they are. They want to be a part of a unit that works hard together, accomplishes the mission, has discipline, and wants to celebrate together. Our unit and many others have organizational days (which some lovingly refer to as "mandatory fun" days), military balls, company runs (which does not include the "run everyone into the ground" type of run), paintball games, retreats, etc. All of these are about creating events where everyone can get involved. Some units showed their appreciation to their Soldiers by giving them a luau in Iraq or Afghanistan. There are many different ways to show Soldiers that we can work hard but we can play hard, responsibly. Soldiers like this, want this and deserve this.

While there are many different areas that contribute to the morale of the unit, some of the most memorable ones are like those I discussed in this paper. Although everything we do does not always work for everyone and there will always be those that you cannot make happy, what matters is that you put forth your best effort to make your team strong, cohesive and positive. Your efforts will make a difference and your servant leadership will prevail.

If you would like to learn more about this topic, I recommend you take the time to read J. Brown, *Organizational History* and visit the following websites: "U.S. Army Family and MWR Command" at <http://www.army.mil/fmwrc/about.htm> (<http://www.army.mil/fmwrc/about.htm>), "U.S. Army Public Health Command" at <http://phc.amedd.army.mil/topics/healthyliving/n/Pages/WeightManagement.aspx> (<http://phc.amedd.army.mil/topics/healthyliving/n/Pages/WeightManagement.aspx>) and "The Center for Army Profession and Ethic" at <http://cape.army.mil/> (<http://cape.army.mil/>).