

Interpersonal Communication

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Specialist Ryan Halter, an intelligence analyst for 2nd Advise and Assist Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, takes a quiz at Contingency Operating Base Warhorse, Iraq, June 20, 2011, to determine what type of communication works best for him. Halter joined a group of Soldiers who took the class designed to help improve communication skills. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Justin Naylor)

Today's Operating Environment (OE) requires dynamic leadership in order to meet the myriad of challenges our Soldiers and organizations must face in the often volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world in which we operate. Being able to effectively communicate the mission and intent in order to achieve shared understanding and ultimately the desired end state requires not only clear and concise guidance, but also an understanding and appreciation for the fact that Soldiers must be given the flexibility and latitude which will enable them to exercise disciplined initiative within that guidance and intent in order to execute and accomplish a given mission. Understanding how Soldiers receive and perceive that instruction is paramount to interpersonal tact.

Interpersonal skills are extremely important as they directly contribute to the leadership competency of leads and more specifically, communicates. Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 6-22 (Army Leadership) discusses interpersonal tact in paragraphs 5-11 through 5-18. It outlines the key components which influence tact and the variables (diversity, self-control, emotional factors, balance, and stability) which leaders must be cognizant of as they may have a direct effect on the leader and their subordinates. In fact, maintaining effective interpersonal communications skills ensures that both parties understand their role in developing solutions to problems which are mutually beneficial. Some may argue that tact is merely the ability to act diplomatically or with a greater sense of empathy in order to convey respect to a superior, however that respect should be mutually recognized and beneficial. Regardless, tact remains an important competency, one which should be continually developed and routinely used when communicating with subordinates, peers and superiors in order to build cohesive, effective and efficient teams.

Recognizing the variable of diversity among others within a group allows a leader to better understand how a Soldier's upbringing and other societal influences helped to shape them as an individual. Paragraph 5-13, ADRP 6-22 states "...it is unknown how the talents of individuals or groups will contribute to mission accomplishment." Every Soldier has the potential to provide a unique perspective which may be leveraged in order to successfully plan, prepare and execute an assigned mission – be it an idea, method or tactic. Consider a unit who has an infantryman originally from the Philippines who speaks Tagalog fluently. During a tactical questioning scenario in which a person of interest is speaking in that language this Soldier now becomes a key component to mission accomplishment. Being able to employ this Soldier using his talents has now helped the team.

Throughout history we have born witness to countless examples of poor leadership where the leader has lacked self-control or the ability to self-regulate. Displaying "calm confidence" ensures that the team remains focused on the mission as the leader role models behavior which their subordinates may now emulate. In a June 27, 2012 NCO Journal article written by Jennifer Mattson titled "Battling Toxic Leadership" the author quotes the results of a 2011 special report stating that "The presence of toxic leaders in the force may create a self-perpetuating cycle with harmful and long-lasting effects on morale, productivity and retention of quality personnel." Based on the facts referenced in this article notwithstanding, self-control and self-regulation most definitely affects the team. Improper attitudes and dictatorial leadership creates an environment of distrust and ultimately one of dissent.

The final three components of emotional factors, balance and stability work closely together. Each of these as personified and demonstrated by the leader can either positively or

negatively affect their Soldiers. How a leader feels most definitely impacts how he or she interacts with others. Consider for a moment that one of your Soldiers has just received a Red Cross message as the result of a death in their family. What are your actions? Do you look at it as “just” another Red Cross message or even worse, as a distracter from your current mission or do you reach out to the Soldier and let him or her know you are there for them should they need you to be? One of my commanders once told me during my initial counseling that I should “not wear your emotions on your sleeve.” What he didn’t mean in that statement was not to show my emotions period, but he meant that my emotions can and often do have a very big impact on the organization as a whole. An emotionally charged individual may say something in the heat of the moment that they would have otherwise not said or have a message come across wrong. Your Soldiers will follow the example which you role model for them.

ADP 6-22 states that “Leaders communicate to convey clear understanding of what needs to be done and why” and goes on to suggest that communication and influencing activities, when performed correctly, help to develop and extend trust. A leader who lacks interpersonal communication skills such as tact will erode and ultimately destroy the very bedrock of trust within an organization.

If you would like to learn more about this topic it is recommended that you read Army Doctrine Publication, 6-22, Army Leadership and its companion document, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-22, Army Leadership.