

# Problem Solving, Opportunities For Growth

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Soldiers from the 263rd Maintenance Company, 553rd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 4th Sustainment Brigade, 13th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary), put their problem-solving skills to the test at the Leader's Reaction Course on Fort Hood, Texas. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Andrew Parks)

Excellent leaders create situations in which their subordinates can solve problems on their own, and these leaders appreciate problems as opportunities for both subordinate and organizational growth. Leaders, specifically noncommissioned officers at the company level, recognize that their subordinates are often still growing and understand that those subordinates have not had the chance to receive the benefits of experience in the way their seniors have. Coaching and mentoring cannot happen in a vacuum, and few Soldiers can actually learn from other people's mistakes. Great leaders capitalize on issues and problems by using adversity to assist in unit and subordinate development.

Great leaders give others the opportunity to solve problems for themselves, and excellent leaders motivate others to excel by seeing problems as opportunities for unit and self-improvement. No matter how good our command climate is, or how experienced and involved we as leaders are, there will always be problems. It is the response to a problem that defines a leader. A good manager will solve a problem on his own. A good leader will use the opportunity to develop a subordinate. This is not a "that's your problem, not mine" approach to problem solving, but rather an involved leadership opportunity that allows us to coach and mentor our subordinates towards an ownership of their lives and careers. Each of us will respond to problems in our own personal way based on our experience, training, and personalities, but the end result must be the same: an effective, timely solution based in mission accomplishment and the welfare of our Soldiers.

Throughout the history of both America and its armed forces, the ability to solve problems has been one of America's greatest strengths. From its inception, America has faced problems and challenges that at first seemed insurmountable, but which have been solved with American ingenuity and resolve. Looking to General George Washington as he created the first Continental Army, we can see issue after issue being presented and subsequently resolved. Raising, clothing, feeding, and training an army with limited funds to fight a world power required absolute commitment and unwavering dedication. Many of the problems leaders face pale in comparison to our Nation's first commanding general's issues. This is not to say that our issues aren't important, but rather to say that no matter what problem our Soldiers or we find ourselves facing, we should keep them in perspective and deal with them appropriately.

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General Washington did not personally fight the battles; he won the war by providing the Continental Army with excellent leadership. Washington realized that he had to develop his subordinate leaders and create an environment that would allow his Soldiers to solve the problem of winning the war. In order to win the war, his Soldiers had to win the battles. In order for General Washington's Soldiers to win the battles, he had to set the conditions; from dealing with the aforementioned logistical problems, to working with an impoverished continental congress, to choosing terrain and applying sound tactical knowledge, Washington led his Soldiers and allowed them to solve the problems of winning battles.

Approaching problem solving with an emphasis on leadership engages and develops multiple levels of leadership. A young Soldier who was recently married and having financial difficulties is a fairly common occurrence in our Army. This is not your problem to solve directly. Platoon sergeants, squad leaders, and team leaders are a part of the problem solving process, and it is your responsibility to ensure those leaders understand their responsibilities. We assist in ensuring our subordinate leaders know the process of using the Army community services' programs, and we absolutely verify that all of our subordinates know that they must actively seek solutions to problems rather than ignoring them.

Every leader wishes for subordinates who willingly accept setbacks and come up with creative and valid solutions to their problems rather than complaining about their problems or inconveniences. In order to get our subordinates to this level, we must show our subordinates that we personally welcome challenges as opportunities to display our hard-earned experience and ability to overcome and adapt, and that we hold our subordinates to the same standard. Soldiers will follow the example of leaders they respect, and leaders who do not complain and who constantly display cheerfulness and willingness to bear adversity will inspire a similar desire to overcome adversity in their subordinates. Your attitude as a leader is paramount to team building; if you maintain a positive attitude in front of your Soldiers they will naturally mimic that behavior.

The science of problem solving is clear; Field Manual 6-0 ([https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN3747\\_FM%206-0,%20C2%20Incl%20-%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN3747_FM%206-0,%20C2%20Incl%20-%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf)) *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, chapter 4, provides the Army's approach to problem solving. There is no need to discuss this chapter, as it is assumed everyone has read this manual. The art of problem solving is where we excel as leaders. As stated, we apply our experience, formal education and our own personal leadership style to problem solving in order to make our units better and to assist our subordinates in becoming better Soldiers and leaders themselves. Any NCO can be a manager. Management in a company is about the day-to-day processes of our organizations: keeping the training room running smoothly, updating the calendar, holding meetings to ensure our subordinates are tracking the updates to the calendar. Leading is about inspiring and motivating our fellow Soldiers to selfless service, and leading is about accomplishing our assignment mission while caring for the welfare of our subordinates.

When I was serving as a battalion operations sergeant, one of my sergeants really wanted to deploy. At the time he had about five years in service and his only operational assignment was to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. His problem was that he wanted operational experience and my problem was that I didn't want to lose him. He was an excellent NCO and an asset to the S-2 intelligence section. He led by example, remained highly engaged with his Soldiers, and was extremely competent at his job; I didn't want him to leave. Operational assignments and self-development are key to developing leaders, but leaders like my sergeant are essential to the success of any unit they are a part of. This is a relatively straight forward issue: either support an excellent NCO in his development or keep him where he would make my life easier. I knew immediately that I would support his request but didn't want to make it too easy on him. So I asked him what he wanted to do about getting a deployment, as our unit was not on the patch chart, and he said he was already looking into the option of a worldwide individual augmentation system tasking. I spoke with our battalion command sergeant major, who was also hesitant to release an excellent NCO, and we both agreed that both the Army and the Soldier would best be served by supporting his request. In the end, the sergeant did deploy as an individual augmentee in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, and he did gain the knowledge and experience that will serve him and his future units well. The S-2 section continued to be successful, even though the loss of a sergeant was a significant event in such a small section, but every Soldier that knew about this issue also knew that the battalion leadership genuinely cared about their welfare and career.

A problem I had as a team leader was that I inherited an obese Soldier. This was in the beginning of 2001 and the Soldier had sustained a back injury during a field training exercise. He had a profile that exempted him from running, although he only used the profile during physical training or training. During "his" time, he had no issues violating the profile. I counseled the Soldier both on the Army's view of obesity and how to lose weight but it was clear that the Soldier simply wasn't interested in losing weight. One time, during lunch, he stood in front of me with a 20 ounce Mountain Dew in one hand and a Snickers bar in the other and told me that he didn't think my PT plan for him was working. I wish I could say that I reacted maturely. I took this problem as seriously as every other infantry team leader. I wanted an excellent team, and I knew that failing to assist the private in losing weight was going to reflect negatively on me. I spoke with my chain of command, talked to the nutrition counselor, and worked with the private to create a diet and a PT plan that we could agree on. As time went on, it was very clear that my methods were ineffective but the first sergeant was unwilling to chapter the private for failing to meet the body fat standards. My first sergeant believed the process was untenable and told me I would continue to have to deal with the private. I was at a loss. It was clear that my first sergeant did not support releasing the Soldier from service but he wouldn't provide any useful input for getting the Soldier in shape. Fortunately, I had excellent leaders in the company who provided quality mentorship. We decided to give the private a physical fitness test as he was still allowed to do sit-ups and push-ups. I had noticed during PT that due to his obesity, the private could not complete a sit-up because his stomach prevented the base of his neck from passing over the base of his spine as is part of the standard for the sit-up. Six weeks and two PFTs later, the private was released from service. The Army's standards were maintained and I believe the best interests of that Soldier were also taken care of. He would never be promoted, could not perform his job, and was unable to meet the body fat standards. Soldiers in the company knew that the standards were not optional and they no longer had to look at an obese Soldier and wonder why they were held to a higher standard.

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These problems are relatively straight forward, but they are ones that required mature and experienced leadership. In the first case, the science of leadership was in identifying the problem, coming up with, in this case, one valid solution, communicating the solution to our leadership, and agreeing on the best course of action. The art was in having a leadership style in which my sergeant knew that his problem was his to solve and mine to support, and further to have established a trustworthy relationship with both my sergeant and my command sergeant major which enabled an open conversation regarding developing an NCO at the expense of the battalion. In the second case, the science was in knowing the pertinent regulations, support services, and in not sticking with an untenable solution. The art was in knowing I needed mentorship and support, and remaining closely involved with those leaders and my Soldier throughout the entire process.

So, problem solving and leadership are closely linked. As we gain responsibility, we also inherit more problems. We do not have to solve all the problems that are presented to us, but we must ensure that we are involved in the solutions, and that our subordinates take ownership of their problems under our coaching in order to maximize these development opportunities as they are presented to us. I look back on my experience to leaders who have made it clear to me that they would not accept poor performance but who were willing to coach me through my issues. Those leaders stand out as examples for me to compare my own actions against. As we encounter problems, we should always keep in mind that we have also encountered a leadership opportunity and find a way to develop a subordinate or our team while facing the adversity.

If you would like to learn more about this topic, I recommend you take the time to read Army Doctrine and Doctrine Reference Publications 6-22 ([https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/adrp6\\_22.epub](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/adrp6_22.epub)), *Army Leadership*, and Field Manual 6-0 ([https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN3747\\_FM%206-0,%20C2%20Incl%20-%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN3747_FM%206-0,%20C2%20Incl%20-%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf)), *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*.