

Leadership in the Social Media Age

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Social media is a powerful tool that allows noncommissioned officers to extend their leadership influence. This includes teaching Soldiers how to exploit its advantages while upholding Army values. (Graphic by Dayton Ward)

Many people rely on the internet to obtain information, receive news, shop, conduct business, play games, watch films and television, and communicate. Within this realm, social media has served to personalize experiences and afford individuals the opportunity to share them with others. The ability to instantly connect with a network of loved ones and friends, as well as engage with total strangers about similar interests, is perhaps the platforms' greatest strength.

For military members stationed overseas, deployed to forward areas, or aboard ships, social media is an invaluable morale tool that provides a welcome connection to families back home. From an organizational standpoint, employing social media offers ways to share information with other units as well as interact with neighboring civilian communities.

Is social media prone to misuse or abuse? The unfortunate answer to this question is, "Yes." Using the internet and social media brings risk to individuals, businesses, and other public organizations. It can be a conduit for unwanted access to private, personal, and corporate information, and this of course presents even greater security concerns for government and military entities. Nevertheless, social media is an integral part of everyday life, and its benefits can be appreciated even as we work to offset potential risks. For the Army, these are ongoing challenges that noncommissioned officers regularly confront.

Getting In Step with Social Media

In 2007, the Department of Defense blocked social networking sites, such as MySpace and YouTube, on military computers.¹ After revisiting the prohibition in 2010, the DoD rescinded the directive, having determined the benefits of this ever growing method of communication and information exchange could be embraced while taking proper steps to mitigate risk.²

This cleared the way for military personnel to access emerging social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter from DoD computers, and

encouraged units and organizations to explore means of leveraging the power of these venues for important activities such as unit communication, training, family support, and community outreach.³

Today, the government and military's presence on social media is entrenched. For the Army, this effort is spearheaded by the official U.S. Army Social Media (<https://www.army.mil/socialmedia/>) website. Designed as an information portal, it is the primary aid for all Army personnel to better understand their "role in Army social media" and provides easy access to policies, guidance, education, and training in order to "create an environment where trusted information is disseminated to the Army family and the public."⁴

Social Media As A Leadership Tool

The newest generation of Soldiers have no memory of life without the internet or social media. Communicating with friends in private or public online spaces is second nature to them, but by no means are they alone. Statistics and comparison of demographics between the military and the total U.S. population suggests more than 90 percent of the active duty force across all service branches makes regular use of social networking sites.⁵

For Army leaders, social media represents a unique means of extending their influence. It allows for the rapid, concise exchange of information and ideas with Soldiers and their families, as well as the press and the general public.⁶ Unit commanders and senior NCOs use resources such as Facebook to hold "virtual town halls" online. Such platforms offer an effective means of communication with Soldiers and families who may be geographically dispersed.⁷ They can also be employed to conduct training, conferences, or other professional gatherings when assembling the intended audience at a physical location is less desirable or unfeasible from a time or cost perspective.

At the local/tactical level, NCOs have at their disposal an easy means of staying in direct contact with their Soldiers. For those still learning to embrace social media, this can pose a challenge when exploring it as a communications option with subordinates. Even if one does not actively participate in social media forums and other activities, it is still important to understand how younger Soldiers in particular view these platforms.

"Facebook is an extension of the barracks," said 1st Sgt. Aaron R. Leisenring, 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry Regiment, Pennsylvania Army National Guard, during the NCO Solarium II (<http://tradocnews.org/stand-to-nco-solarium-ii/>) event at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Many of the event's participants, including Sgt. Maj. of the Army Daniel A. Dailey, made similar observations.⁸

"We used to go to the barracks and check on the Soldiers," said Dailey. "Of course, that's still true, but there's also Facebook now. You have to be in there."⁹

Social Media As A Leadership Challenge

While social media makes it much easier to interact with their Soldiers, NCOs must bear in mind even this form of constant connectivity is not a substitute for true leadership.

"[Social media] is not how we lead Soldiers," said Sgt. Maj. Boris Bolaños, senior enlisted advisor for the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, during the "State of NCO Development Town Hall 4" presented by the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (<http://www.tradoc.army.mil/>) in March 2017. "It is a way to facilitate communication, but the most effective way to communicate with Soldiers is face to face."¹⁰

Bolaños' comments were made in response to questions regarding online activity and conduct. NCOs carry the responsibility of ensuring their Soldiers acquit themselves at all times as professional representatives of the Army. This obligation includes online activities, where the proliferation of smartphones and other mobile devices within the ranks has made it easy to share inappropriate comments or post information that violates operations security.

Posters may not even realize they made an error. On occasion, mistakes might not be so innocuous. Such missteps can range from sharing photographs of individual Soldiers or unit activities which may violate OPSEC, to engaging in derogatory, inflammatory, or harassing and bullying behavior.

"At the end of the day, it's about those decisions and actions that our Soldiers make on and off duty when no one is watching," said Bolaños.

"How well do we know our Soldiers? How well do we know what they're doing? It goes back to the aspect of leadership, which sets the credibility and foundation for trust."¹¹

With such concerns in mind, the Army has issued clear policies defining expectations for online behavior. The most recent reiteration of these policies is an All Army Activities message, ALARACT 075/2017

(https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/socialmedia/ALARACT_075_2017_professionalization_of_online_conduct.pdf), Professionalism of Online Conduct, which charges commanders and leaders to "reinforce a climate where current and future members of the Army team ... that online misconduct is inconsistent with Army values and where online-related incidents are prevented, reported, and where necessary addressed at the lowest possible level."¹²

While there is a desire to strike a balance between Soldier's private lives and professional responsibilities, it is important to remember that upholding the Army ethic is not a part-time or situational undertaking.

"I don't think we're saying not to go to [certain websites], but we're asking people to remember that they're professional Soldiers, 24 hours a day, seven days a week " said TRADOC Command Sgt. Maj. David Davenport while speaking at the NCO Solarium II "You can't just turn your values

seven days a week," said the DOD command Sgt. Maj. David Davenport while speaking at the DOD Summit in . "You can't just turn your valves on and off just because you're on one of these social media sites."¹³

Risk to operations security is another obvious concern social media presents. Addressing this ongoing threat requires planning and training not just for Soldiers but also their families and friends. Everything from a spouse or parent's post announcing their loved one's pending deployment, to photos of a Soldier or a unit's location with attached geographical location data, are examples of disclosing sensitive information.¹⁴

"Geotagging" is often an automatic feature available on smartphones and digital cameras. Once uploaded to a publicly viewable social media site, photos that include this data are no different from supplying a ten-digit grid coordinate to indicate where it was taken. The potential to unintentionally disclose sensitive information is a very real danger.¹⁵

NCOs, as the first line of Army leadership, must recognize issues like these as ongoing concerns, and develop planning and training in order to teach their Soldiers how to better extend their situational awareness into the online space.

Conclusion

Properly utilized, social media is a formidable tool which allows the Army to connect with a global audience. NCOs must recognize that it is also an important part of their Soldiers' lives as well as those of their families. While there are risks which must be acknowledged and challenged, they can be reduced through proper training and education. Resources such as the Army's social media site (<https://www.army.mil/socialmedia/>) are available to assist NCOs with learning to exploit social media's advantages while teaching Soldiers how to uphold Army values.¹⁶

Read more on this subject in the Military Review's "Soldier, Are You on My Friends List? An Examination and Recommendations for the Military Leader-Subordinate Relationship on Social Media (<http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2018-OLE/Soldier-Friends-List/>)."

Notes

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