



Master Sgt. Tomas Fernandez, human resources plans and operation noncommissioned officer, U.S. Army South, explains how to prepare an award certificate to Sgt. Jamie Garcia, personnel management NCO, during a one-on-one training session. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Mahlet Tesfaye)

Tact, lessons from the past

By NCO Journal

The use of tact as a tool, when correcting others, is a useful skill and one that every noncommissioned officer should possess.

What is Tact?

Tact, as defined by Merriam Webster's dictionary is, "A keen sense of what to do or say in order to maintain good relations with others or avoid offense."¹

Tact according to Don Gabor, author of *Speaking Your Mind in 101 Difficult Situations*, requires a sensitivity to others combined with the skill to speak at any given time without giving offense.²

Consider the following scenario: You are walking to an appointment and notice a Soldier not wearing a cover. As an NCO, you have the authority to make an on-the-spot correction. Your method of delivery is a measurement

of your tact³ and correcting his deficiency tactfully will make the encounter less confrontational.⁴

By effectively exercising tact, you demonstrate that you are a thoughtful, professional, and competent NCO.⁵

Interpersonal Tact

Tact is not only useful when making on-the-spot corrections but also when dealing with difficult situations where an NCO's lack of tact could destroy his or her credibility with subordinates and senior leaders.

Take for example a Soldier who received a Red Cross message. Whether deployed or in garrison, the Soldier will require support and understanding as he or she goes through a range of emotions. This is where a leader's "interpersonal tact" will be put to the test.⁶

Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership*, talks about interpersonal tact as one of the components of a leader:

Effectively interacting with others depends on knowing what others perceive. It relies on accepting the character, reactions, and motives of oneself and others. Interpersonal tact combines these skills, along with recognizing diversity and displaying self-control, balance, and stability in situations.⁷

Duty assignments with a battalion, brigade, staff or multi-service task force also require interpersonal tact to prevent misunderstandings and embarrassment. It requires a serious study of customs, culture, and standards.

Patton's Lack of Tact

During World War II, Lt. Gen. George S. Patton, then commanding general of the Seventh Army, was involved in an incident where lack of tact nearly cost him his career.⁸

On August 3, 1934, [Patton] visited an evacuation hospital outside of Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus that held many wounded troops. Coming across Private Charles H. Kuhl, who showed no visible wounds, Patton asked the Soldier why he was there. He was not wounded. Kuhl replied — “I guess I can’t take it.” Patton flew into a rage. Cursing the private, he called him a coward and ordered him to leave the tent. When Kuhl did not move, Patton slapped Kuhl’s face with a glove, grabbed him by the shirt collar, pushed him out and kicked him in the rear.⁹

While this is only one example of Patton’s lack of control, there are other occasions where his lack of tact created concerns with his superiors, enough so that he was eventually removed as commanding general of the U.S. Fifteenth Army.

Sympathy & Empathy

Developing tact requires effort and, according to ADP 6-22, self-control. It also calls for the ability to sympathize and, when possible, empathize with others.

One definition of sympathy is understanding another’s feelings and motivations.¹⁰ Using the first scenario, mutual understanding could be attained by asking the Soldier if he lost his hat. Phrasing the question this way allows the Soldier to explain himself before receiving a correction. By using a tactful approach, an attitude of confrontation can be lessened or avoided.

Empathy occurs when an individual is able to identify with the thoughts and feelings of another.¹¹ This is not always easy, since everyone’s life-experiences are different. When possible, however, it is the most sincere way to be tactful, since the NCO is able to relate on an equal level with the other person, allowing mutual respect and trust to be present in the conversation.

Eisenhower’s Use of Tact

Tactfulness was one of General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower’s many talents. As commanding general, he had cause to use it after Patton slapped Kuhl. Here is an excerpt from the letter he sent to Patton after he learned of the incident:

I am attaching a report which is shocking in its allegations against your personal conduct. I hope you can assure me that none of them is true ... I am well aware of the necessity for hardness and toughness on the battlefield. I clearly understand that firm and drastic measures are at times necessary in order to secure desired objectives. But this does not excuse brutality, abuse of the sick, nor exhibition of uncontrollable temper in front of subordinates.¹²

In his letter, Eisenhower provides a perfect example of tactfulness by first questioning what he has heard about the incident: “I hope you can assure me that none of them is true.” He then shows sympathy with the idea that a leader has to be hard at times: “I am well aware ...” He also shows empathy with the words, “I clearly understand ...” He then ends the paragraph with the appropriate correction.

Eisenhower and Patton were great friends, with many shared experiences. He knew Patton was a brilliant tactician, however, he became frustrated in his attempts to use him because of his inability to display self-control, balance, and stability in certain situations.

Conclusion

The saying, “Tact is the ability to describe others as they see themselves,” has been attributed to Abraham Lincoln.¹³ No matter who said it, it is certainly an important insight into the way NCOs can develop tact. NCOs who acquire the ability to speak and act in a tactful manner will not only make friends more often than enemies, but will also gain the respect of their Soldiers and leaders. ■

Notes

1. The New Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1989), s.v. “Tact,” definition 1.

2. Don Gabor, *Speaking Your Mind in 101 Difficult Situations* (Mumbai: Embassy Books, 2006).

3. Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Publishing Office, August 2012, Glossary-1. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/adp6_22.pdf.

4. N.A "Tact and Diplomacy," Skills You Need, 2017, accessed October 11, 2017, <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/tact-diplomacy.html>.

5. Army Doctrine Reference Publication "Army Leadership, (Washington D.C: U.S. Government Publishing Office, August 2012).

6. ADP 6-22.

7. Training Circular 7-22.7, Noncommissioned Officers Guide, 7 April 2015, p 4-24.

8. Military History Now Staff. 2016. Smack Down - How the 'Patton Slapping Incident' Nearly Cost America One of its Greatest Generals. Sept 9. Accessed Oct 24, 2017. <http://militaryhistorynow.com/2016/09/09/smack-down-how-the-patton-slapping-incident-nearly-cost-america-one-of-its->

[greatest-generals/](http://militaryhistorynow.com/2016/09/09/smack-down-how-the-patton-slapping-incident-nearly-cost-america-one-of-its-greatest-generals/).

9. Michael Keane and Grover Gardner, Patton Blood, Guts, and Prayer (Grand Haven, MI: Brilliance Audio, 2014), 184-185.

10. The New Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1989), s.v. "Sympathy," definition 1b.

11. The New Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1989), s.v. "Empathy," definition 1.

12. Carlo D'Este, Patton: A Genius For War, (New York: Harper Collins, 1995).

13. According to Don E. Fehrenbacher, in his book Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln, Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 50, there is no documented proof Lincoln said this.



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