

Dealing with Failure

By Master Sgt. James H. Clifford

Originally published in the Spring 1997 issue



“Every senior NCO serving today has made his or share of mistakes. We didn’t reach our positions because we were super sergeants. We got here with a lot of help. Our leaders allowed us to make our mistakes and learn from them.”

Have you ever gotten a good tip from an NCO on an FTX, ARTEP or Command Inspection? I’ve gotten plenty. Have you ever wondered where that NCO learned that tip? Ask the Soldier and you’ll probably find the NCO learned from his or her mistakes. Most of us don’t remember those things we did right the first time. Why is that? Of course, it’s because we learn indelible lessons from our mistakes. Success seldom provides the important lessons of life.

In today’s drawdown Army, many of us are becoming “zero defect” NCOs. I see this as a dangerous trend. It’s not unreasonable that in a downsizing environment we fear the effect of being labeled as a failure. We also fear being labeled as indulgent of failures. Not being able to deal with Soldiers who fail has a chilling effect on mission accomplishment. A leader must strike a balance between failure and success in every Soldier and every mission.

I offer the following thoughts to NCOs to help them cope with failures in their Soldiers and themselves. First, accept it. Everyone fails on a regular basis. By accept, I don’t mean condone, excuse, or ignore. I do mean expect, understand, and use it as a development tool. Every senior NCO serving today has made his or her share of mistakes. We didn’t reach our positions because we were super sergeants. We got here with a lot of help. Our leaders allowed us to make our mistakes and learn from them.

Barber schools used to start students off by having them shave a balloon. Imagine how many barbers there would be if they flunked when they popped that first balloon. You only learn by doing. Allow your Soldiers to occasionally make a mistake. They will learn from it.

Today, we have new equipment, technology, and doctrine from when I first enlisted. All of that is the product of countless mistakes and returns to the drawing boards. Most ideas are “half-baked” at first. Those who do not fear making a mistake are the best at innovating new ways of doing things. Innovation and motivation are a by-product of a climate where Soldiers feel free to use

initiative. Initiative, I think we can all agree, is one quality we want to encourage. Success in battle demands Soldiers be willing to take risks. A Soldier unwilling to take risks will not stay alive to complete the mission. These risks are not taken lightly. Soldiers calculate the risks, based on knowledge of the situation, training, equipment and the mission. A Soldier must be aggressive to survive. Fostering a zero defect climate destroys this aggressiveness. Soldiers



U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to 1st Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment, 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, conduct dismounted movement drills as part of the Light Leaders Course at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, March 17, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Peter Chang)

who are afraid to take a risk in peace will never take a risk in war. Improper handling of a subordinate who makes a mistake may just cause that Soldier’s death on a future battlefield. Our history is full of aggressive combat leaders who made their share of mistakes in peace.

Understanding and using failure as a development tool and a willingness to take calculated risks are import-

ant leadership traits. The most important, however, is an understanding that the proper handling of failure is a character builder for Soldiers. Soldiers who know they will get fair treatment are less likely to lie about their actions. If your Soldiers know you to be a fair, understanding leader, they will be honest with you. Soldiers who know their leaders are waiting for them to screw up have nothing to lose when called on the carpet. If they know there is nothing to gain from being honest, they will not be. Leaders who have a well-developed strategy for dealing with the shortcomings of their subordinates have problems with Soldiers lying to them.

This does not mean failure lacks consequences. On the contrary, failure in the Army is such a serious matter we must deal with it in a systematic way.

Failure frequently brings deadly consequences. That's why it is so important for us to understand it.

To find the balance I referred to earlier, leaders must know how to assess failures. We must balance the failure against the Soldier's potential to develop into the honest, motivated, innovative, aggressive Soldier who will survive on the battlefield.

Leaders must take into account five factors when assessing failures—the offense, integrity, attitude, the Soldier's record, and our investment in the Soldier. The first step in assessing the failure is to gather information about the offense. Was the Soldier in question at fault? If so, why? Did the Soldier have adequate training and leadership? Is there proper guidance in the form of regulations, SOPs, etc.? Did injuries occur? Was there property damage? Will there be some negative impact upon another's career, such as missed school quota or late award recommendation? Can the Soldier correct the mistake or overcome the failure? What has happened in the past? Is this a common error? Does it happen on regular basis? Did you, or someone else, issue previous warnings?

Leaders must ask themselves these and other questions before they commend or take action. Some mistakes are serious enough that you have no choice in your reaction to them. They are regulated either by law or policy. These matters may be out of your hands. The chain of command may be responsible for initiating action. But most failures involve minor matters and are subject to evaluation. You have the power to judge and take action.

The integrity of the Soldier is an important factor to consider in assessing failure. Ask yourself these questions. How did I find out about it? Did the Soldier bring it to my attention or was he or she caught in the act? Even if caught in the act, does the Soldier take responsibility for his or her actions? Did the Soldier try to cover up the event or blame others? These are questions of character. The answers play a major concern as you contemplate your reaction. A Soldier with a strong character is worthy of your effort. Weak characters are a drain on military effectiveness and may not deserve favorable consideration.

The Soldier's attitude will either help resolve the situation or make it worse. Does the Soldier recognize the error? Is the Soldier taking positive steps toward resolving the situation? Soldiers who know their weaknesses and take action to improve are better than those who can do no wrong. Soldiers must participate in their improvement. Leaders may be able to lead their horses to water but cannot make them drink. Soldiers must be willing to soldier back from failure.

Consider Soldiers individually. Look at their prior records. All other things being equal, the Soldier's record should tell you a lot. Don't cast a good Soldier adrift based on one mistake. Consider the record. Is the mistake likely to be repeated?

Finally, consider the investment you and the Army have in the Soldier. Beyond the money spent on training, how much have you invested in the Soldier?

Investments grow when you consistently add to the principle and allow the interest to compound. Your efforts will only pay off if you allow Soldiers to grow.

Assessing failure is a complex issue. You can take the easy way out by creating a zero defect environment, or you can develop your subordinates. The first approach creates Soldiers who lack initiative and motivation. The second imbues Soldiers with motivation to persevere and succeed against the odds.

"Soldiers who know they will get fair treatment are less likely to lie about their actions. If your Soldiers know you to be a fair, understanding leader, they will be honest with you." ■

Master Sgt. Clifford is with the 149th Ordinance Detachment, Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland.



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal/>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

