



(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Robert Mercado taken July 17, 2019) A U.S. Soldier with the 1-230th Assault Helicopter Battalion reunites with his family after an 11-month Kosovo deployment, July 17, 2019.

Genuine Leadership, the Little Things Matter

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Over the last eleven years the Army has experienced significant challenges in the health of the force. These challenges include ill-discipline, increased suicide rates, behavioral health issues, escalated divorce rates, and high risk behavior. As a noncommissioned officer (NCO) Corps, we must do our part to assist our senior leadership in solving some of the most significant challenges our Army has ever faced. We can do so by applying genuine leadership and making the little things matter. As an NCO Corps we have a responsibility to foster an environment where each Soldier is respected and can have trust and confidence in their leadership. It is our job to make a difference. By applying

genuine leadership we can set the conditions for Soldiers to openly discuss the challenges they face in their lives. Your genuine leadership and wise counsel can and will make a difference.

Genuine leadership by itself is not the solution; however, it's a method NCOs can utilize to move us forward. Each of the problem sets discussed above, require engaged leaders at all levels to identify and resolve the issues within our ranks today. Whether you view these challenges as an individual or collective problem, a leader who is genuine and knows their Soldiers and their Families extremely well will notice when something isn't quite right. When Soldiers know you genuinely care



(U.S. Army photo by Amber Kurka taken March 13, 2020) U.S. Army Sgt. Thea Dougher, a food inspection sergeant, walks through an arch of crossed swords to officially become a member of the noncommissioned officer corps during an NCO Induction Ceremony held at Fort Shafter in Hawaii, March 13, 2020.

about them, it fosters a climate of trust and open dialogue within your organization. Experience has shown that when Soldiers face a difficult situation in their life they turn to the people they trust and count on the most. As an NCO Corps if we insert genuine leadership in our day-to-day business, we can make a positive impact on our Soldiers, their Families, and our Army. With a collective effort, the NCO Corps can begin to solve some of the most significant challenges in our Army. The challenges we face in our Army today can and often do have an adverse impact on the mission, unit readiness, organizational climate, and the trust relationship between our Army and the American people. It is critical that NCOs across the force do their part so our Army is ready, disciplined, healthy and postured to face the next operational mission.

Over the next few paragraphs, I will share personal experiences which I believe have made a difference. There are many philosophies, techniques, and ‘tricks of the trade’ applied across our Army; I will not attempt to convince you that mine are better than another. However, I will share how I have applied genuine leadership and made the little things matter which resulted in a positive impact on Soldiers, their Families, and the organization.

In *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP), 6-22*, the Army defines leadership as, “the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.” When you integrate genuine leadership, you have an impact on shaping a positive command climate,

building trust with your subordinates and their Families, and showing the American people how we value the service of those we lead. Genuine leadership is nothing magical and can be accomplished by doing three things. First, know your Soldiers and their Families and take time to go the extra step. Second, always place their needs above your own. Finally, you must develop a professional relationship built on trust and proven action; where the Soldier knows unequivocally you will always be there for them no matter how difficult the situation.

I have always viewed leadership from the lens of a parent. Am I treating the

young men and women who serve in our formation as I would want my children treated? As NCOs, each one of us assumes a level of parental-like responsibility. We nurture and protect our Soldiers from the things that might cause them harm; we apply discipline when needed to correct behavior; and we possess extreme pride when our Soldiers succeed. Leadership is the lifeblood of our Army and has been an essential element of our success as an institution for the past 237 years. From the formation of the Continental Army to the Global War on Terrorism, NCOs across our formations have led our nation’s sons and daughters in peace and in war. In my professional opinion, it is direct leadership at the team and squad level which allows for the greatest opportunity to apply genuine leadership. The young corporal or sergeant who has the privilege of spending quality time with their Soldiers each and every day can have the biggest impact. This is where leadership happens in our Army, as many leaders have stated, “Where the rubber meets the road”. This is where our NCOs know Soldiers and Families so intimately that they can quickly identify when something may be wrong.

An essential piece of my leadership philosophy has always been “Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care”. As an NCO, some may simply bark commands and demand that their Soldiers perform; however, at the end of the day they will likely only achieve minimal results with their subordinates. The NCO which demonstrates to a Soldier they have

their best interest at heart and genuinely cares for their well-being will achieve far greater results; their Soldiers will exceed their greatest expectations. Caring and knowing is one of the most crucial things you can do and it is not a simple task. In order to make a difference, you must know your Soldiers and earn their trust and confidence. You must dedicate your time and educate yourself on everything about them...your knowledge base cannot be leader's book deep. You must know their life story, their spouse, their children, mother, father, siblings, birthdays, anniversaries, motivations, likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses and much, much more.

So why should you know these things about your Soldiers? First of all, it shows you care enough to take the time to know them and their Families. Secondly,

their Family leverages the human dynamic of leadership and it will earn their respect and admiration.

Throughout my career, I have gathered many stories on how I have made the little things count. I will share two brief experiences where I applied genuine leadership and made the little things matter. As a first sergeant, I experienced the unexpected death of a Soldier. I never realized how much I had personally touched this Soldier and his Family until returning to his hometown for his funeral. In the last few months leading up to his death, this Soldier had experienced the loss of many Family members and friends. One morning before PT, I learned he had experienced yet another loss in his family; this time it was his grandfather, a decorated combat veteran and paratrooper in WWII. Prior to the Soldier's departure on emergency leave, his NCOs

and I gave him a small memento to carry back for his grandfather's funeral. This gift cost us only \$3.50 and mere moments of our time to prepare, yet it was quite meaningful to the Soldier and had a tremendous impact on him. Why did it have such an impact? It demonstrated to the Soldier that his NCOs were genuine, empathetic, and cared for him both as a person and as a Soldier. So what was this gift? It was a simple 8x10 framed copy of the paratrooper's creed dedicated to his grandfather with a set of airborne wings. Our words were simple and brief, "We're sorry for your loss, please pin these on your grandfather's chest, Once a Paratrooper always a Paratrooper". These simple words and genuine gesture from his NCOs who took that extra step had convinced him that he served in the best organization in our Army.

The second example I will share is a technique I have used and encouraged my NCOs to use throughout their career. I have routinely requested Soldier/Family contact information during a Soldier's integration to the unit. I inform them that with their consent, I will periodically send correspondence to their parents and loved ones about the great things they are doing for our Army. I would personally strive to correspond with five to ten different Families per month. With other key leaders in the unit also participating, we were able to dramatically expand our sphere of influence. The only resources required were stationary, an envelope, a postage stamp and our time. In



(U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. David Edge taken May 16, 2019) U.S. Army Pfc. Devin White, 19th Expeditionary Sustainment Command, is inspected before entering the enlisted board of Eighth Army's 2019 Best Warrior Competition at Camp Casey, South Korea, May 16, 2019.

Soldiers do not have expectations that their leader will know about a special event in their life; but when an NCO recognizes that special day it means the world to them. Finally, you have the ability to give a Soldier a memory of a special leader who cared enough and they will carry those moments with them forever. Taking the time to know and care for your subordinates and

less than one page, we would summarize how well their son or daughter was performing. Imagine the pride of a parent when they learn that their son or daughter briefed the Commanding General and received accolades. You would be extremely surprised at the positive impact it can have on a Soldier and their performance when their parents compliment them on the great things they have achieved. From the Soldier's view, you have gone well beyond what they expected from their NCO. Once again, by simply giving a little bit of your time, Soldiers quickly realize how important they are to you and the organization. A great time to craft these notes is during 'payday activities.' Most units in our Army set aside time for their subordinate leaders to counsel their Soldiers during that particular day's events. This is a great time as a key leader to step away for an hour and take the time to write a few words to one of your Soldier's mother and father.

In the first example mentioned above, I stated I never realized how much I had personally touched my Soldier and his Family until after he had passed away. The Soldier's platoon sergeant and I had arrived at the home of our deceased Soldier, not knowing what to expect and we were greeted at the door by the Soldier's mother, a tremendous woman who was coping with the unexpected and tragic loss of her son. Surrounded by a mass of Family and friends, we were obviously anxious about meeting the Family for the first time. We quickly realized that the Family did not consider this as our first time meeting. Over a six month period, his parents had received eight letters from his NCO leadership keeping them abreast of how well their son was doing as a Soldier and those letters had clearly made a difference. We spent the next several hours talking about their son and the great Soldier he had become before his passing. Throughout our conversation their other Family members continually referenced letters written by their son and encouraged their mother to read them. She eventually mustered the courage to pick up a stack of those letters written by her son. It was not until she started reading the words on those pages that we realized how genuine leadership had influenced this Soldier. Teary-eyed and broken-hearted, she read letter after letter from her son who boasted about his NCOs and how they had become influential leaders in his life; how he desired to emulate their actions; and how they had such a genuine concern for each of their Soldiers. What we had not realized was that throughout his time in the unit, NCOs had consistently applied

the genuine leadership that our great Soldiers deserve each and every day. We had simply treated him and his fellow Soldiers in the company as we would have wanted our own children to be treated.

Throughout the night, details were discussed about the funeral services scheduled for the following day. One such detail was that during the ceremony there would only be one speaker to deliver remarks. The Family had asked me to eulogize their son on behalf of our NCOs, so I graciously accepted, humbled by the opportunity to represent a great group of leaders. The pastor however seemed to be extremely anxious and troubled by their decision. Inquiring why he was troubled, we learned that the Soldier's church was not extremely fond of our current conflicts or the military; however, they were very supportive of the troops themselves. The pastor informed us that since the Church's existence, a Soldier in uniform had never walked into their church and most certainly had not addressed the congregation. He was troubled by what he thought would be a max exodus during the service.

Over the course of the evening in order to prepare my remarks, the platoon sergeant and I made a few phone calls back to his NCOs to capture their thoughts. What we realized that night was that the words flowed effortlessly onto the paper. They did so not because of our writing ability but because his NCO leadership had known him as both a Soldier and as a man. We knew his likes, dislikes, sad times, funny times, and what motivated him to excel. That next day I walked to the lectern and addressed the congregation fully anticipating a mass exodus; however, there was none. The words delivered on behalf of the NCOs were genuine and came from our



(U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Ashunteia Smith taken June 8, 2019) U.S. Soldiers with the 111th Infantry Regiment, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team conduct a company live-fire rehearsal during Exercise Decisive Strike 2019 at the Training Support Centre, Krivolak, North Macedonia, June 8, 2019.

experiences with the Soldier; every person in attendance was attentive, touched, and emotional at the words conveyed. After the funeral, the platoon sergeant and I were asked by the pastor and key congregation members to walk outside for a private discussion. The congregation was not aware leaders in the Army knew their Soldiers in such personal detail and cared for them in such a genuine manner. They had not known that leaders were emotionally attached to their Soldiers and took the time to know them individually. What came next demonstrated the impact that genuine leadership can have on a Family, a community, and the American people. The congregation had voted to change 150 years of their church's belief thereby welcoming any Soldier in uniform and allowing them to address the congregation at any time. This impact had nothing to do with the platoon sergeant or I, our individual personalities, or an ability to address a crowd; it had everything to do with a group of NCOs who knew their Soldiers, genuinely cared for them, and who spoke proudly about their Soldiers.

There are numerous ways you can apply genuine leadership. These are but two brief examples of things that can be done which can have a positive impact well beyond an organization's climate. Soldiers will remember the little things because they matter; rest assured that they will treasure those small experiences and carry it with them forever. Throughout the years, many of my former Soldiers have become NCOs and take great pride in sharing the little things they have done for their Sol-

diers. I was fortunate enough to leave an image in their mind of how little things matter to a Soldier and when applied consistently how they can make a difference.

In conclusion, I have shared a few of my own experiences which may help to not only explain what genuine leadership is but may also help my fellow NCOs become a more genuine and caring leader. Although these examples have taken place in my career, there are countless others where genuine NCOs across our Army have made an impact on their Soldiers, their Family and their organization. My intent was to share information which may help to shape your leadership skills and benefit the Soldiers, their Families and formations you help lead. When NCOs effectively apply genuine leadership we do our part in combating some of the most significant challenges we face in our Army. When a Soldier knows unequivocally that leaders genuinely care for them they are far less likely to have discipline issues and they will serve to make everyone around them proud. They will come to you in their time of need, potentially at that critical point when the Soldier is contemplating taking his or her own life. They will confide in you for your counsel when confronted with tough challenges. They will be far less likely to engage in high risk behavior and will think twice about how their actions will negatively reflect on you, the unit and our Army. Your genuine leadership and wise counsel can and will make a difference to a Soldier. Always remember, "Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care." ■



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