



(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Megan V. Zander taken Dec. 18, 2019) U.S. Army Soldiers with 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division prepare to approach a target during squad-level live-fire training in Rukla, Lithuania, Dec. 18, 2019.

# Ownership

## This is My Squad

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Note: The following article provided the concept for the future TIMS App.

Shortly after assuming the duties of Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA), Michael A. Grinston set forth an initiative entitled, “This is My Squad” (TIMS). The goal of the initiative is to build more cohesive teams throughout the U.S. Army. Grinston identified that both the Ranger Regiment and Special Forces units tend to exhibit greater team cohesion than traditional Army units. Their training is intense and creates “shared hardships” that all team members must bond together to endure. Additionally, because of the closeness of these teams, they usually have better knowledge of each individual team member and their families. This helps unit leadership effectively anticipate

problems that may arise so they can prevent or fix them early (Rempfer, 2019).

TIMS comes on the heels of the “Army People Strategy,” proposed by Gen. James McConville, 40th Chief of Staff of the Army. The strategy focuses on deliberately managing the talents of the Total Army Force to increase readiness. “People are the Army. They are our greatest strength, our most important weapon system” (Kimmons, 2019, para. 15). The concept is intended to move the Army away from a reliance on systems and technology, and put the focus back on its people in preparation for the future fight. With this goal in mind, SMA



Grinston requested that one team from Cohort Five of the Benavidez Leader Development Program at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York examine the TIMS concept and predict any problems that may affect team cohesion as well as offer possible solutions.

Five noncommissioned officers (referred to as “Team 3”) identified an overarching theme of ownership that team and squad leaders should possess to be effective. After Team 3’s discussion and research, it was decided the most important factors to focus on to ensure teams would build cohesiveness would be: *in-processing of new Soldiers to teams, noncommissioned officer (NCO) education throughout the Army, “know your people” in order to develop the individual and the team, and ensuring proper leader development.* The following sections look at possible solutions the Army could implement to create better leaders at the lowest level to improve team cohesion throughout the force.

## Ownership

Team 3 looked over a broad list of possible topics communicated from SMA Grinston and concluded that an overarching theme of ownership applied to the majority of these topics and is applicable to any unit level in the Army. Individually, Soldiers demonstrate ownership over their physical, mental, and occupational development while also updating personal records, and other important aspects of their career. Although individual ownership is important, successful teams cannot depend solely on individual ownership to foster full team cohesiveness. Ownership must also be demonstrated by unit leaders, especially at the squad and small group level. Squad and platoon leaders must take ownership of training, supporting, and caring for the members of their teams.

## Reception of New Team Members

Reception and integration, often referred to as in-processing, is the first moment a Soldier is exposed to their new team. There are many inconsistencies in how a



U.S. Army Soldiers arrive from one station unit training at Fort Benning, Georgia to Fort Riley, Kansas to begin in-processing, April 17, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Timothy Brokhoff)



(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Amada Hunt taken April 23, 2020) U.S. Army trainees with the 434th Field Artillery Brigade conduct physical readiness training during basic combat training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, April 23, 2020.

new Soldier might go through in-processing. Having an assigned sponsor in the Army Career Tracker or a battle buddy assigned to show someone around is only a small step in the overall experience, and one that is sometimes not done thoroughly (Bugala, 2017).

In-processing is a critical time for setting a Soldier up for successful socialization to their new unit and team culture. Team culture is defined as “the way a set of people behave and think which stems from the attitudes and belief system that they all share. A collection of people that are working together to achieve a common goal and objective” (“What is Team Culture,” 2019, para. 2). This forms the basis for how team members interact and the type of environment in which teams operate. If the squad leader does not take ownership of getting to know new Soldiers and properly introduce them to team members and culture, they may feel left out. Or worse, the Soldier may negatively affect the climate of the team, if, for instance, another team member instills the wrong ideas in the new Soldier’s understanding of the culture. This can lead to issues with team dynamics.

To ensure unit leaders understand how to assimilate new Soldiers into the team culture, it is important new members are trained in positive cultural socialization. It is essential Soldiers are trained early in their career to be good followers, team members, and leaders. Training in socialization, team/group dynamics, and strong team culture can be applied in Advanced Individual Training and Basic Leader Course. By doing so, junior Soldiers can establish a solid foundation early to build effective leadership skills.

## Promotions and the Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System (NCOPDS)

When a Soldier is promoted into the NCO ranks, they should be transferred out of their current squad or platoon in order to facilitate fresh leadership dynamics. There is the possibility current team members would still

view them as an equal. A newly promoted sergeant should receive additional training on organizational socialization, team dynamics, leadership training, emotional intelligence, and other psychological aspects useful to building strong leaders and cohesive teams. Additionally, if the NCOPDS could accredit their schools and partner with a university or college like the Sergeants Major Academy, a degree or certification can be accomplished earlier in an enlisted Soldier's career (NCOLCoE, 2019; Woods, 2019).

There is also a need for more relevant evaluation, to include self-assessments. There are numerous tools used in educational and business settings like the Kolb Learning Style Inventory that help identify how someone learns best from experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2013). These self-assessments would benefit all Soldiers and could be instituted at each level of NCOPDS. Training young NCOs in these practices will help them to be better followers, team members, and leaders, as well as help them recognize and prevent toxic leadership behavior (Department of the Army, 2017). This will allow building positive and high-achieving team culture quickly at the beginning of one's leadership career.

### Know Your Team, Grow Your Team

In addition to instruction, development, and discipline, NCOs are the Army's first line of care for most Soldiers. If a squad leader only focuses on mission and discipline, they risk not developing individual Soldiers or the team as a whole. They should take the time to get to know each individual Soldier on their team and establish a personal bond. This bond will create trust and make each Soldier feel as if they belong to the team.

In 2015, researchers at Google published their findings on Project Aristotle. Over the course of two years, they performed a company-wide research project to study the effectiveness of teams and find what drives the most successful teams. Their findings showed that the "who" and "what" of the team – such as whether the team had one strong leader or was more democratic, homogenous or more diverse, all intelligent and formally educated or not, and working on a simple or difficult task – didn't matter. There were five factors that were consistent in the most effective teams. The five factors are:

- **Psychological safety:** Can we take risks without feeling insecure or embarrassed?
- **Dependability:** Can we count on each other to do high quality work on time?
- **Structure and clarity:** Are goals, roles, and execution plans clear?
- **Meaning of work:** Are we working on something that is personally important for each of us?
- **Impact of work:** Do we fundamentally believe that the work we're doing matters? (Rozovsky, 2015, para. 5).



Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston discusses the future of large-scale training rotations at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California, May 13, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Casey Slusser)

The Army has a reasonable amount of focus on dependability, structure and clarity, meaning of work, and impact of work. But what about the number one factor: *psychological safety*?

Psychological safety is a shared belief by all team members that it is safe to take risks. This is necessary for strong, cohesive teams, and leaders need to learn how to instill and develop it within their units. Each team member must have confidence the team will

not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up or contributing a new idea.

Teams that demonstrate psychological safety are centered on trust and respect and leaders of these types of teams do not need to have all the answers. They embrace humility, curiosity, feedback from others, and invite other team members' opinions, questions, and challenges to current trends and beliefs (Rozovsky, 2015). The most cohesive teams are able to question and give feedback up, down, and across the hierarchy (Duhigg, 2016).

So why does this matter to a squad leader, and how does it affect knowing their individual Soldiers? Leaders can develop their unit cohesiveness by instilling psychological safety into team culture. By positively building squads at the lowest level, it becomes the foundation for success throughout the Army at every level.

### New Trends

As a final aspect of leader ownership, Team 3 developed an idea to aid new Soldiers and squad leaders alike. The proposal is a mobile device app that could revolutionize how a squad leader receives and integrates Soldiers into the team. We would call this app "MySquad." MySquad would encompass all necessary elements of a Soldier's military records, to include their reception and integration, counseling and rating files, training and readiness, photos of their chain





U.S. Army Soldiers with the Benavidez Leader Development Program (Team 3), participate in a group meeting, Feb. 19, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Courtney Martin)

of command, items pertinent to the unit and team culture, and even an element for anonymous feedback. Ideally, the squad leader, platoon leader, and first sergeant would have new Soldiers automatically uploaded to their own profile by their personnel staff. Once the

new Soldier arrives, the leadership team would have access to the new Soldier's information and would not need a computer to work through in-processing. The Soldier's information could be identified by their Department of Defense ID number or some other method of anonymity not tied to personally identifiable information. Encryption would need to be strong enough to protect sensitive information; however, from a user standpoint, it could prove extraordinarily useful and efficient.

## Conclusion

In closing, Team 3 saw ownership as the philosophical backbone that could revolutionize team cohesion in the U.S. Army. If NCOs embrace ownership and the TIMS philosophy of building positive relationships, not only will this positively affect mission success and unit readiness, but it will lead to greater Soldier retention and recruitment of top talent for the U.S. Army. This will ultimately prepare the U.S. Army to succeed in any future conflict or battlefield. ■

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