



(U.S. Army photo by Capt. Adan Cazarez taken Oct. 24, 2017) A U.S. Army squad leader with the 58th Military Police Company, gives feedback during an after action review following a vehicle mounted patrol training exercise at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, Oct. 24, 2017.

Inspiring High Performance

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In 2019, Secretary of the Army Ryan McCarthy and Army Chief of Staff Gen. James C. McConville announced that people should be the number one priority of the U.S. Army (Department of the Army, 2019a). This means noncommissioned officers (NCOs) should inspire, care for, and invest in their Soldiers at all levels. Strong leadership provides purpose and direction to accomplish the mission and improve the organization (Department of the Army, 2019b). Yet how do NCOs create an environment that promotes innovation but also instills Soldiers with purpose, direction, and motivation? The solution is to focus attention, use positive reinforcement and rewards, give consistent feedback, and encourage creativity.

Focus Attention

An important aspect of inspiring leadership is to make sure the unit has a focus, which should be centered on the commander's intent (Department of the Army, 2019c). An NCO's clear understanding of this

intent allows the unit to collaborate towards a common goal, creating a decentralized execution, the ultimate goal of mission command. Chad Storlie, combat veteran and author, writes for the *Harvard Business Review*:

“Commander's intent fully recognizes the chaos, lack of a complete information picture, changes in the enemy situation, and other relevant factors that may make a plan either completely or partially obsolete when it is executed. The role of Commander's Intent is to empower subordinates and guide their initiative and improvisation as they adapt the plan to the changed battlefield environment. Commander's intent empowers initiative, improvisation, and adaptation by providing guidance of what a successful conclusion looks like. Commander's intent is vital in chaotic, demanding, and dynamic environments. (Storlie, 2010, p. 2)”



(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Gordon Penn taken March 13, 2020) U.S. Army Master Sgt. Joseph Bicchieri, 356th Broadcast Operations Detachment, coaches Sgt. Rohity Shrestha for the Land Navigation Course in preparation for the Combined Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst (JBMDL) Best Warrior Competition, March 13, 2020.

Positive Reinforcement and Rewards

A Soldier's behavior is a function of their training and reinforcements, both positive and negative. According to *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22: Army Leadership and the Profession*, "Positive reinforcement such as tangible incentives (time off) as well as intangible rewards (praise or recognition) can enhance motivation" (Department of the Army, 2019b, p. 5-5).

There are four main types of positive reinforcers:

1. Natural reinforcer – a Soldier that studies hard is naturally rewarded with a good test score.
2. Token reinforcer – earning points in a system that can be saved up and turned in for a reward. For example, Bravo Battery, 1st Battalion, 94th Field Artillery Regiment's "Bulldog Incentive Program" (Deveraux & Castignanie, 2019).
3. Social reinforcer: A social expression of approval like "good job" for a positive behavior.
4. Tangible reinforcer: A physical or real reward such as cash or a valued object. (Cherry, 2018).

The Society for Human Resource Management did a performance management study and found that rewards affect behavior only if they are received, meaning that if rewards are scarce, fewer people are affected (2017). Rewarding performance should not just be limited to extremely high-performing Soldiers. They should also be used to help connect Soldier performance behaviors to the accomplishment of organizational goals. When the reward is something a Soldier wants to earn, feels is possible to earn, and trusts the reward will be delivered when achieved, Soldiers will perform better than when there is no reward system in place. Rewards and positive

reinforcement build esprit de corps and increase Soldier buy-in to unit mission success (Anderson, 2019).

Consistent Feedback

Counseling sessions provide feedback to Soldiers about what tasks they are doing right and what actions are observed, appreciated, or need to be adjusted. The act of perpetual counseling increases engagement, collaboration, respect, and trust between NCOs and subordinates (Adams, n.d.). Not only does counseling orient the Soldier towards the unit's goals, but also develops them to become leaders as they progress in their career.

The following are six tips to conduct a productive counseling session (Signore, 2018):

1. Find a good location – make sure the setting is quiet and both parties can focus.
2. Schedule the counseling in advance – this allows both parties to make sure their schedules are clear.
3. Ask open-ended questions – asking these types of questions helps the counselee reflect on their performance and goals and contribute towards mutually agreed upon solutions, which are more likely to be followed.
4. Identify short-term and long-term goals – This helps the subordinate have multiple goals with different timelines so they're always working towards an objective.
5. Type the counseling in real-time – pre-typing the counseling form gives off the appearance of a cookie-cutter formality. Discussing and typing out goals and plans on the spot builds trust that their development is important to the counselor.
6. Have the counseling packet present – Ensure the subordinate Soldiers' relevant documents are available for review, such as Leave and Earnings Statement, Soldier Record Brief, work order requests, Record of Emergency Data (Department of Defense Form 93), etc. and are up-to-date. This ensures the Soldier knows they are cared for and important to the NCO and organization, as well as helps identify any administrative issues.

Creativity

Soldiers who explore new ideas and embrace creativity accomplish great things, but also occasionally fail. If your unit operates in a zero defect mentality, where failure is always punished severely, then you are creating a culture of fear that actually hinders personal growth and development (Efron, 2017; Mascia, 2020).

According to Col. John Cogbill:

☘ Creativity is essential to achieving a culture of innovation. In the past, the Army has not placed a premium on creativity, nor has

it created an environment for it to thrive... Although the Army previously had creative leaders or episodic moments of tactical, operational or strategic brilliance, it will not be able to bring those discrete moments of creative genius to scale in a way that will allow the Army to guarantee U.S. competitive advantage on future battlefields unless it can address the obstacles that inhibit a culture of innovation. (2018, para. 3)👏👏

Soldiers who are harshly penalized for honest mistakes when executing regular duties will not exhibit innovative behavior. The overly-criticized Soldier will likely only execute specific and directed tasks, the opposite of the mission command philosophy (Department of the Army, 2019c). Abigail Phillips, Ph.D. psychology researcher,

conducted a study and found that a leader's manipulative, passive-aggressive, credit-taking, and overly critical behavior can lead to workplace bullying, job dissatisfaction, psychological distress, and depression; when applied to the U.S. Army, this reduces unit effectiveness and overall Army talent retention (Phillips, 2017; Carucci, 2018).

Conclusion

NCOs must create a positive environment that focuses their unit's attention, uses positive reinforcement and rewards, gives consistent feedback, and promotes creativity. This will inspire Soldiers to seek innovative solutions to mission objectives while still following the commander's intent. Positive leadership will attract and retain the U.S. Army's top talent and prepare it for future success. ■

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