



(U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Matthew Johnson taken April 20, 2020) U.S. Army Spc. Eric Hayden, 37th Field Artillery Regiment, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, fires an M777A2 while Staff Sgt. Robert Hartner, gun chief, braces to handle the shock of firing at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California, April 20, 2020.

Leading Generation Z: Abandoning the Zero Defect Mentality

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The U.S. Army is a microcosm of the broader U.S. population. When generations transition into positions of leadership, the Army also reflects this transformation. As the millennial generation ascends in rank, shifting into positions of greater responsibility, Generation Z (Gen Z) continues to fill the junior ranks, comprising roughly half of the Army's enlisted force (Department of Defense, 2017). Effectively leading these Soldiers requires a return to the principles of *mission command*, moving away from the risk-averse, zero defect mentality which today's millennial leaders are accustomed.

The Millennial Mentality

The *zero defect* mentality — a philosophy in which

any mistake is unacceptable and punished harshly may be a reflection of a broader societal phenomenon that occurred in the early 2000s. During this timeframe, Generation X (Gen X) was raising the millennial generation. Gen X, growing up in an age of absentee parents, overcompensated in their own parenting style and became micromanaging “helicopter parents” (Wiedmer, 2015). It is possible, during the Global War on Terrorism, Gen X and millennial leaders adapted this parenting style to their leadership style, creating the “helicopter commander.” According to the *Military Review* (2017), helicopter commanders “behave in similar ways as helicopter parents, hovering above subordinates, ready to offer increased direction at every turn” (Breckinridge, p. 15).

In fairness, this leadership style was likely created out of genuine concern for subordinates and a realization that risk aversion and a zero defect mentality may lead to less loss of life, especially in the context of war. Yet despite its best intentions, the zero defect mentality is contrary to mission command philosophy, which, according to *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0: Mission Command*, emphasizes decentralized leadership, which allows subordinates to exercise disciplined initiative, but also requires leaders to accept prudent risk (Department of the Army, 2019a).

Toxic Leadership

According to results from the Center for Army Leadership (now the Center for the Army Profession and Leadership) Annual Surveys of Army Leadership, between 2006 and 2010, 24% of leaders believed honest mistakes were held against them, and only 55% of leaders believed it was acceptable to seek help within their units (Hinds & Steele, 2012). One might think that as Soldiers who endured this style of toxic leadership moved up the ranks they would not impose the same treatment on their subordinates, but that proved to be false. The zero defect mentality produced success in the eyes of superiors focused on short-term goals. This resulted in frequent promotions to those who embraced this negative leadership style. The same surveys showed that while leaders recognized this leadership style as problematic, 18% of those who experienced toxic leaders said they would still emulate those leaders due to their success (Hinds & Steele, 2012). This paradox has created a cycle of oppressive leadership that has stifled innovation.

To its credit, the Army tried to implement countermeasures to this problem utilizing the multisource assessment and feedback (MSAF) 360 tool and command climate surveys, which allowed subordinates to provide anonymous feedback to leaders. These were beneficial for leaders who wanted to improve but did little to change the behavior of toxic leaders who did

not care their subordinates perceived them as such (Hinds & Steele, 2012). Furthermore, in 2018 the Army removed the requirement to use the MSAF 360 tool and reduced requirements to complete command climate surveys to reduce administrative tasks, focusing more on readiness and lethality (Myers, 2018).

Generational Differences

While both millennial and Gen Z generations are intelligent, their motivations and goals differ. Millennials are more collaborative and “expect more supervision and feedback, clear goals, structure, and mentoring.” (Wiedmer, 2015, p. 55). Gen Zs are more competitive, prefer to work on their own, and want leaders to judge them on their own merits (Patel, 2017b). Gen Z grew up as digital natives with access to unlimited information. Deep Patel at Forbes (2017a) says Gen Zs “want to manage their own projects so that their skills and abilities can shine through. They do not want to depend on other people to get their work done” (para. 8).

To effectively lead this generation of Soldiers, senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) will need to cultivate their subordinates’ goals and motivations, ensure they have the necessary resources to complete the mission, and allow them to innovate and be creative. Adopting mission command philosophy, millennial leaders should focus on the “why” rather than the “how” of the mission.

Conclusion

As Army demographics shift, and millennials become senior NCOs, Gen Z Soldiers will continue to fill the junior ranks. Millennials must provide effective leadership by embracing the principles of mission command, accepting prudent risk, and abandoning the zero defect mentality of the early 2000s in order to prepare the force for the future fight.



(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Jeffery Harris taken June 14, 2018) U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to the 730th Area Support Medical Company of the South Dakota Army National Guard conduct Virtual Convoy Operations Training during Golden Coyote 2018 at Camp Rapid, South Dakota, June 14, 2018.

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