



U.S. Army Soldiers with the 642nd Aviation Support Battalion test their leadership and team work skills on a Leadership Reaction Course at St. Bonaventure University, Olean, New York, April 14, 2018. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Stanley Bagrowski)

Creating Cohesion

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Sexual assault and harassment are major concerns throughout the U.S. military. While major strides have been made in awareness and reporting, prevention lies at the squad level with first line noncommissioned officers (NCOs). Squad leaders and team leaders (SL/TLs) must accept responsibility for their subordinates. The obligation is at the lowest level to accept ownership in developing a cohesive unit by following the foundation of Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael A. Grinston's This is My Squad (TIMS) initiative.

The personal importance of this issue is prefaced by my own sexual assault in the military. In 2010, the Department of Defense (DOD) made progress in push-

ing for greater sexual assault prevention and response (SAPR); however, it was during this year I was sexually assaulted (Department of Defense, 2010). What would be the most difficult period of my life also motivated years of sexual harassment and assault response and prevention (SHARP) advocacy. I embraced every opportunity to teach, spread awareness, and learn. What follows is my insight as an NCO and sexual assault survivor and how ownership and relationships built on trust are the keys to successful implementation of This is My Squad, which will create trust among Soldiers and reduce sexual assault and harassment in the Army.

The Importance of Cohesion

Two Soldiers sexually assaulted me while I was on temporary duty for training. They were not part of my unit and I had no previous interaction with them. My unit was a performance-based unit, highly trained and skilled at our jobs, with relationships forged by two combat tours. We were hailed by others as *highly professional*. While there was some truth to that statement, my unit lacked the necessary cohesion to give me the confidence to report the assault. Because of this lack of trust, it was five years before I reported it to anyone. I did not feel comfortable enough to express my vulnerability and feelings to others. I know I am not the only one in the military who has struggled with coming forward because of distrust in the system or fear of being blamed or ridiculed.

This past year the entire climate and culture of Fort Hood came under investigation because of multiple incidents publicized in the media. The results of an independent review of Fort Hood's command climate and culture were published and nine major findings were emphasized:

1. Implementation of the SHARP Program has been ineffective due to a command climate that failed to instill SHARP program core values below the brigade level.
2. There is strong evidence that incidents of sexual assault and sexual harassment are significantly underreported.
3. The Army SHARP program is structurally flawed.
4. The Fort Hood Criminal Investigation Division had various inefficiencies that adversely impacted its mission accomplishment.
5. The mechanics of the Army's adjudication processes involving sexual assault and sexual harassment degrade confidence in the SHARP program.
6. Public relations & incident management have deficiencies.
7. There were no established procedures for first line supervisors in 'Failure to report' situations that define appropriate actions in the critical first 24 hours.
8. The criminal environment in surrounding cities and counties is commensurate with or lower than similar sized areas: However, there are unaddressed crime problems on Fort Hood because the installation is in a fully reactive posture.
9. The command climate has been permissive of sexual harassment/sexual assault. (Fort Hood Independent Review Committee, 2020, p. iii)

To further expound upon the problem of sexual assault across the military, according to the *Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military: Fiscal Year 2019*, sexual assaults in 2018 for women age 17 to 24 increased from past years (Department of Defense, 2020). These facts raise the questions: Despite the resources on hand and mandatory annual SHARP training, why are people still committing SHARP violations? And just as importantly, especially looking at the Fort Hood report findings, why are victims and survivors not

reporting these violations as they happen? The answer is a lack of cohesion and trust.

What is Cohesion?

According to Eduardo Salas' study on measuring cohesion, it is measured both vertically (between subordinates and leaders) and horizontally (among Soldiers of the same element) (Salas et al., 2015). Cohesion is further classified as task cohesion (working together to reach organizational goals) and social cohesion (the bonds that form social relationships) and can have varying levels of efficacy as it pertains to the reduction of sexual assault and prevention.

From a personal military perspective, at the time of my assault, my unit was highly cohesive, but purely at a task-oriented level (task cohesion). It was a culture where results and metrics were what mattered, a misrepresentation of full unit cohesion. To prevent this from happening in other units, SLs/TLs must accept responsibility and ownership for their Soldiers and get to know them beyond just a name on a roster or a unit readiness number. Not only should Soldiers feel comfortable enough to report their own assault or harassment, they should also feel comfortable enough to report witnessed infractions against others.

By increasing cohesion among Soldiers, you increase the likelihood witnessed instances of harassment will be met with immediate intervention and reprimand. This is the result of the desire to protect and defend their fellow Soldier with whom they have a bond of trust. Soldiers who share strong social cohesion cooperate better, are mutually supportive, and are oriented towards similar commitments and goals ("Building Team Cohesion," 2020).

To study the benefits of team cohesion and group makeup, Google conducted a study to answer a simple question: "What makes a Google team effective?" (Rozovsky, 2015). Initially, they thought they would find the perfect personality makeup for a successful team, such as each team needs a leader with a higher education degree, and two extroverts and an introvert, etc. But what they discovered was personalities don't make successful teams, their interactions do. "Who is on a team matters less than how the team members interact, structure their work, and view their contributions" (Rozovsky, 2015, para. 4). Even in the civilian sector, at a highly successful company like Google, unit cohesion is necessary to perform at high capacity.

A Foundation of Trust

Thinking back to the conditions and environment of my assault, what my organization lacked at the time was a balance of horizontal and vertical cohesion. I did not feel comfortable enough with my leaders to reveal my vulnerability. Performance and results were all that mattered and my assault would assuredly detract from both. This is, to a degree, not completely the fault of my previous leaders. They were very effective at what they were trained and expected to do – achieve results. However, it wasn't until

I was under the leadership of a new sergeant first class that I witnessed first-hand the results of a squad that fully embraced horizontal and vertical cohesion.

My new squad was still a performance-based organization focused on achieving results, but also treated Soldiers as real people. Leaders got to know us on a personal level, took an interest in us and our families, and created an environment where we developed strong social and vertical cohesion and trust. It is in this environment — where I trusted my subordinates, peers, and higher leadership, and knew they valued me as a person — I finally reported my sexual assault for the first time.

Combating Sexual Assault

Sexual assault and harassment deteriorate unit cohesion, but the inverse is also true – unit cohesion reduces instances of sexual assault/harassment (Salas et al., 2015). SLs/TLs can change the culture in which their Soldiers operate. “Soldier care” is not merely an Army buzzword, but an effective leadership strategy that can enhance all aspects of cohesion to successfully change a culture. The act of spending time getting to know your Soldiers, discussing sexual harassment, and taking a thoughtful and deliberate approach to SHARP training can reduce SHARP violations within your squad/team while also establishing a foundation of trust.

In an effort to raise public awareness and affect change, grassroots movements have sprung up across social media following the murder of Fort Hood Soldier Vanessa Guillen. The hashtag #IAmVanessaGuillen went viral on multiple social media platforms last year, where Soldiers and veterans alike shared their stories of being sexually assaulted or harassed – many for the first time. This gave survivors a cathartic voice and one that is being used to push for renewed legislation regarding sexual assault and harassment (Correll, 2020; Kirk-Cuomo, 2020).

SLs/TLs do not need to wait for a nationwide grassroots movement to push for change. They can immediately begin developing a unit culture and climate that respects the dignity of all Soldiers by discussing sexual assault and harassment, the SHARP program, and their commitment to it routinely – not merely during annual SHARP training. The open discussions and dialogue will not only publicly display their commitment to an environment free of sexual assault and harassment, but also give survivors and unreported victims an avenue to come forward. Speaking from personal experience, these informal discussions can often have a much greater impact on encouraging reporting than more large-scale formal approaches.

Solutions

“Do you sit down with your squads? Do you spend time with them?” – Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael A. Grinston (Lacdan, para. 3)

Sergeant Major of the Army Michael A. Grinston’s TIMS

initiative centers on small unit cohesiveness starting at the lowest level. The TIMS strategy follows Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. McConville’s People First strategy and encourages leaders to build relationships with their subordinates in order to work together and accomplish the mission (Dunlap et al., 2020). The following solutions are ways to both build trust between leaders and subordinates and effectively combat sexual assault and harassment.

Counseling

One way to build group cohesion is to get to know your Soldiers on a personal level. Monthly counseling is an invaluable tool for speaking to your Soldiers about personal, professional, and organizational goals while providing coaching, counseling, and mentoring, but as NCOs, we must get to know our Soldiers in order to better lead them and foster trust and cohesion (Holmberg et al., 2019). Squad and team events are a perfect opportunity to get Soldiers to interact with one another when they ordinarily might not.

Involve the Community

The previously mentioned sergeant first class was able to accommodate squad/team lunches, team-level birthday breakfasts, and weekend squad-level events, all of which showed interest in not just individual Soldiers, but also included their communities. She also routinely inquired about our family, knew our children and spouse’s information, and developed a genuine interest in keeping family members informed. All our family members knew and cared for her and it greatly increased our vertical cohesion. Leaders at the lowest level need to think outside of the box, get past the standard counseling forms that have been around for decades, and make the counseling personal and tailored to the individual Soldier. This is how SLs/TLs can personally invest in their Soldiers’ development and build a foundation of trust.

Improve SHARP Training

And finally, SHARP training itself can be improved. A 2016 U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) report stated that over the last three decades training “has not worked as a prevention tool – it’s been too focused on simply avoiding legal liability” (EEOC, para. 10). This is a prevalent concern in the Army (“check the box” training) and, in this context, again, can result in a lack of trust in the system. One solution can be to add role-play scenarios like 1st Cavalry Division is currently doing in order to make the training more life-like and impactful (Petry, 2019). Units can also create a simulation / role-playing game with actors like Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California is currently doing with the U.S. Army Soldier

Center's Simulation and Training Technology Center. Creating training programs in this style would better reach Generation Z and would make training more interactive (Laclan, 2019).

A final way to increase engagement in SHARP training is to add personal stories from assault survivors, either through video-recorded interviews or as guest/panel speakers. Last year I was the keynote speaker for the 5th Annual U.S. Army-Bavaria Voices of Awareness/Faces of Prevention SHARP symposium. I told my personal assault story to a room full of sexual assault response coordinators, and victim advocates. Adding that emotional aspect of SHARP is effective and the brutal honesty of it is much needed in the Army SHARP training. In my experience, Soldiers often view SHARP as stats, graphs, and PowerPoint slides. By having survivors speak, we add a face to the statistics, increase emotional involvement and Soldier and leader buy-in.

Conclusion

America is fed up. Its citizens have shown they will not allow crimes and injustices to go unresolved on military bases and just be swept under the rug anymore. Something must be done about the growing number of sexual assault cases as well as the underreporting. The TIMS initiative and the strategies covered in this article are not radically new ideas, but rather common sense approaches backed by research and data compiled over the last 30 years: Build cohesive teams, develop trust, treat Soldiers like real people, and train to ensure SHARP processes are understood and implemented. This starts at the SL/TL level. It falls on their shoulders to ensure TIMS success by taking ownership of their teams and changing the culture within. This is how the U.S. Army will create resilient and successful teams that can deploy, fight, win, and come home. ■

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