



(U.S. Army graphic)

Reflections on Leading, Values, & Beliefs

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It is not enough to just recite the Army values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. Soldiers must embody them and inject these values into their everyday life. This can be aided by reflection — an introspective process involving deliberate contemplation of thoughts, emotions, and events and their effect on the world around them. The reflective space unites learning and experiences and generates empathy and critical thinking. This is a part of the leadership development process and requires a strong sense of purpose and active embrace of experiences to affect change (Walker & Reichard, 2020). This article utilizes reflective writing from Soldiers at the U.S. Army's Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A) illustrating the powerful process of reflection in senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs).

Reflection

For the U.S. Army, reflection is a skill that helps leaders correct mistakes, consider multiple outcomes in the decision-making and mission planning process, and explore experiences that are sometimes difficult to communicate (Bolton, 2014; Department of the Army, 2015). “Reflective practice is a twenty-first century imperative to mindfully and effectively negotiate the emerging landscapes through pausing, attending, revising, adopting and adapting new insights” (Ganly, 2018, p. 721).

Reflective Writing

The practice of reflective writing focuses on the writer's experiences and attempts to identify the significance and meaning of these experiences as it applies to the world

around them. It has the potential to facilitate both self-reflection and an understanding of concepts learned. Reflective writing exercises with Soldiers can connect personal experiences and Army values (Walmsley & Birkbeck, 2006).

Army Values

The Army Values represent what being a professional Soldier is all about. They are the foundation to being a strong leader. But while the Army Values are the bedrock of Army culture, it takes personal commitment and dedication to live by those values. In order to align with *Field Manual (FM) 6-22: Leader Development* and its philosophy “Improved thinking strategies will create greater self-confidence, making it more likely to address rather than avoid complex challenges,” we recently pushed for reflective writing from Soldiers at the SGM-A (Department of the Army, 2015, p. 5-2). The following passages are from Soldiers regarding what the Army Values mean to them and how they affect their lives.

Those who value selfless service are committed to the team, going further, enduring longer, and looking closer to see how they can add to the effort.

Now more than ever, I find myself pondering why. Why do I serve? Has my time been in vain? Will they remember my name? Do I really make a difference in what some consider a game? A game of chess. Am I a pawn or the queen? Will I be protected by any means? But then I remind myself that it isn't about me, it's about the ones who came before and fought for others to be free. It's for the young ladies out there who need to dream and believe, there's a place for them in this Army. It's for those who wish to go to college, but in America that comes with a hefty fee. It's for those who never thought they'd make it out of their city. It's for those who believe a woman can't achieve, and it's for my grandmother who never gave up on me. It's for those children who call me Mom, those friends who call me Sis, it's for the ones who are gone and will forever be missed.

Serving in the Army is a very selfless calling; we all enter for different reasons. However, the longer we stay the more those reasons converge. Salute to my brothers and sisters in arms who made the ultimate sacrifice. Salute to the family who cannot kiss their son or daughter good-night. I serve for those who can't. I serve for those still pushing through boot camp. I serve for those who desire to be free; I serve for those who came before me.

-Master Sgt. Jessica N. Waller
Student, Class 71, SGM-A

The value of loyalty informs those to do their share. The value of duty is to fulfill an obligation.

I am huge on mindfulness and honoring the people who get the work done. Leaders often forget about that and the act of forgetting can fuel burnout in Soldiers and leaders.

We have to be able to exercise more care and concern. Something as simple as a “Good morning” and “How are you?” before getting to business sends the simple reminder that a person's well-being matters.

-Sgt. Maj. Renee Hamilton-McNealy
Class 70, SGM-A

Do one's thing and understand that your best self is all that matters. Duty defines character so do your job without being told. A person with character understands the standards of behavior and what is and is not acceptable to carry out assigned tasks. The value of duty can never be underestimated when fulfilling ones' obligations. Why go to such lengths just to keep a promise? At the end of the day, it's about being your best self while you do your thing. This sentiment is a continuation of the dogma and traditions set for a military professional. The NCO creed demands ones' commitment. Doing ones' thing and understanding your best self is all that matters is why values that build character are important to increasing not only your own happiness but also the happiness of others. Carrying out a task to completion or fulfilling a promise can bring degrees of comfort and maybe move you one step closer to becoming the best person and leader you can be.

Watching the sun rise as I am running, running to moments of pride

*The stars and stripes waving, heart pumping, blood coursing through my veins, bloodshed, not today
Running colorless for life, equality, equal, no not equal
Running towards justice, still hopeful not hopeless
Running for we, the people, black, white, all who are Americans*

Running as if I had wings to freedom, liberty, maybe running from history

Running in homage to my country

Running, I ask, why me

Running I answer, why not me

-Evelyn Hollis, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, SGM-A

The value of respect is to treat people as they should be treated.

The fundamental principle of the Army Value of respect relates to how Soldiers should treat others. According to ADP 6-22: Army Leadership and the Profession, respect is defined as “treat people as they should be treated” (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 1-12). On its surface, the textbook definition of respect is an admirable interpersonal principle, but the definition lacks clarity upon critical reflection. Where I differ from the Army's approach to treating others with respect is in the application of the word “should.” The term “should” infers a conditions-based treatment of others, meaning treating others based on others' actions. A more precise definition

of respect is warranted. Respect should be defined as esteeming others with high regard. I believe the revised definition is more indicative of how the Army wants Soldiers to demonstrate respect. Soldiers must recognize that it is their responsibility to always treat everyone with respect.

So how do we esteem others with high regard? The outward manifestation of this concept is through respectful verbal and nonverbal communication. When discussing respect with my Soldiers, I teach that they should conduct themselves as if they are being broadcast live on the news or social media and to envision their families present during the interaction. In my 27 years of active-duty service in the Army, I found the practice of regulating communication helps to esteem others in high regard and sets the professional example of how to treat others with “respect.”

-Sgt. Maj. John A. Alam Sr.

Deputy Director, NCO Professional Development Directorate

Those who value honor carry out, act, and live the values.

To live up to every Army value. For me, it was a process. From the beginning of inculcation to the tremendous experiences that made me realize just what an honor it is to serve.

From the first friend who had to pay the ultimate price for freedom, to the first friend's retirement from service, and realizing it was an honor to be counted among them.

From the first leadership position I held and all the mistakes I made, to the point when I realized I was preparing leaders to replace me and understanding what an honor it is to lead.

From having the confidence to follow orders and eventually the experience and courage to challenge a decision I knew was wrong and knowing what an honor it is to represent truth.

Honor is holding immeasurable internal value on every aspect of placing Soldiers' needs above my own, pushing my organization to success, developing leaders of the future, and knowing with all my heart, that service is an honor and I am honored to serve.

-Sgt. Maj. Deitra A. Alam

Vice Chair, SGM-A

Those who value integrity, do so legally and morally.

As I open my eyes each day; I do what is right in every way.

I am a Soldier, I am honest, and I am free; my parents and NCOs instilled moral principles in me.

I was taught never to deceive others, treat them with dignity and respect; the world calls on the American Soldier to defend and protect.

I serve the American people with my head held high and with grace; knowing they trust me never to lead them to disgrace.

Integrity is a value and takes courage, intelligence, and commitment; we learned the true meaning of this Army Value during our oath of enlistment.

Through Integrity, I gained strength of character, discipline, and resiliency; being honest and truthful to yourself and others is brilliancy.

Salute to my brothers and sisters who died fighting for our country with Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Personal Courage, and the most important, Integrity; every day, the American Soldier will carry on your legacy.

-Master Sgt. Sierra L. Aquawo

Student, Class 71, SGM-A

Those who value personal courage are willing to stand up for and act upon the things that are right and wrong.

Through thick and thin, I'll be strong.

Loving and caring but I must continue on.

They can be my downfall—if my frailty shows—taking a piece of me with them and only I will know defeat.

But functioning independently without them, my future I can see—changes in myself, my life, and me.

The experiences of life have much to teach, but without constructive thought, I will not reach my goals.

I'll be strong though constraint be like shackles on my feet.

I'll be strong thinking back and knowing I have them beat.

-Barbara Yancy-Tooks, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, SGM-A

Conclusion

The Army Values set expectations for behaviors and actions in all situations. Reflection, and using reflective writing techniques, is a way for Soldiers to examine and connect to these values using their own experiences. This exercise in diversity of thoughts and perspectives allows for introspection and personal growth. Because each Soldier is different, sharing these reflections builds empathy and understanding and can strengthen trust and compassion for others. ■

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