



U.S. Army Soldiers with the 25th Infantry Division Artillery, participate in a 36-hour “This Is My Squad” competition intended to build strong and cohesive teams through tough and realistic training at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, July 28-29, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Jessica Scott)

What Soldiers Want

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“Since the Revolutionary War, NCOs [noncommissioned officers] have had the tasks of maintaining standards, training their teams, and leading soldiers. These primary duties remain the same, but NCOs have had to adapt as progression necessitated changes.” (Fails, 2004, p. 3)

With each new generation comes a new set of values, learning styles, and effective leadership principles. Post-millennials (also known as Generation Z or Gen Z), born from 1996 to the present, now constitute nearly 90% of the Army’s active duty junior enlisted and nearly 35% of all junior officers (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2018, p. 29). In order to provide Soldiers with their preferred leadership style, NCOs and leaders must know what is required of them to effectively lead this new generation.

To discover this insight, I conducted a study and interviewed 20 Gen Z junior enlisted Soldiers stationed at Fort Rucker, Alabama, in 2020. The gender breakdown of my study was 65% male and 35% female. The racial and ethnic makeup was 25% African American, 10% Asian-Pacific Islander, 15% non-White Hispanic, and

50% White. In addition to helping NCOs adapt their leadership styles, this data will enable those who develop NCO training and leadership schools to inculcate meaningful change to the current design or curriculum.

Generation Z Characteristics

Gen Z is different from their predecessors in that they are the first generation to grow up with computers, smartphones, and the internet (Patel, 2017). Moore (2019) describes Gen Z as valuing interconnection, information, interaction and therefore want to know why they are doing something, why it is important, and why they cannot attempt to do something a new and different way. And Miller (2019) wrote Gen Z favors leadership styles that emphasize competitiveness, creativity, and the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes.

Jenkins (2020) states:

“93 percent of post-millennials revealed that an organization’s impact on society affects their decision to work there, 84 percent believed they have the necessary skills to be successful in a professional environment, 58 percent are open to working nights and weekends, 77 percent think they need to work harder than past generations, and 76 percent of post-millennials are willing to start at the bottom.” (Jenkins, 2020, p. 72).

Gan (2019) states that Gen Z, who will make up over 90% of all new recruits, have the right attitude, values and behaviors to serve in the Army effectively. Based on that data, it would be easy to conclude that Gen Z would adapt well to military service. However, the Army has continued to primarily focus its training and instruction on the preceding millennial generation (millennials) (Reid, 2018). This has caused generational conflicts as Gen Z Soldiers view leadership horizontally as opposed to the traditional vertical hierarchy the Army has in place (Peebles, 2021). This results in a disconnect in how senior-level leaders believe they should lead Gen Z Soldiers as opposed to how Gen Z Soldiers wish to be led (Miller, 2019).



A U.S. Army squad leader with 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, speaks with his Soldiers during a training exercise at Fort Drum, New York, Sept. 10, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Brandon Cox)

What Gen Z Soldiers want from NCOs

Participants in my research study stated they wanted NCOs to be fair in the way they led, empathetic to their concerns, confident in the way they led, and honest in their interactions. The 20 Soldiers also added that they preferred NCOs who took charge and pushed them to perform better. Overall, there were a total of six themes that I found which best represented the respondents’ answers to the research question of how Gen Z Soldiers wish to be led. They were Army Values, fairness, role models, confidence, motivation and inspiration, and empathy.

Army Values

The Army Values of leadership, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage was the number one theme discovered during my research (Hanks, 2021). One participant summed this up best by

stating that good NCOs do not lie to Soldiers or make promises they know they cannot keep.

Fairness

Lips-Wiersma, Haar, and Wright (2020) state leaders exhibit fairness by holding subordinates to acceptable standards and being reasonable in their responses. The Gen Z Soldiers in my study related that fairness and engaging others without judgment or bias was important for them to establish trust. Therefore, NCOs who want to be successful should strive to look for alignment among Soldiers and try to create mutually effective outcomes.

Role Models

According to Boatwright (2016), leadership role models are people who are already in positions of authority whom workers look up to and emulate. While role models may not necessarily be in leadership positions, Gen Z Soldiers prefer NCOs to serve as role models.

Confidence

Gen Z Soldiers stated they want competent NCOs who are proficient at their jobs so they can properly train and lead Soldiers. Several Soldiers provided negative examples of NCOs who are not proficient at their jobs and view them as fakes and poor leaders who do not inspire trust.

Motivation & Inspiration

Gen Z Soldiers not only want NCOs who can motivate them to complete regular tasks, but who can also inspire them to achieve bigger goals through positive motivation and inspiration. Many respondents used motivation and inspiration interchangeably; however, they are different and distinct. Inspiration means to give somebody the urge to do or feel something, while motivation is something from the outside that compels one to take action (Badubi, 2017). Farag et al. (2009) described the difference between the two, suggesting motivation comes from an external source in an external environment, and inspiration comes from within. It is important for NCOs to note the differences to cultivate them their Soldiers.

Empathy

Empathy enables people to develop rapport and trust with others. It is also a critical skill for leaders to develop and practice in order to successfully lead teams to accom-

plish their missions. Though empathy, emotions, and viewpoint are all important to achieve outstanding evaluations, they are not necessarily part of the NCO evaluation process.

Recommendations

Gen Z Soldiers believe leadership is a major factor influencing their decision to reenlist and continue their Army careers, or not. As NCOs, we are the ones directly responsible for shaping and developing young Soldiers into future NCOs.

During my study, I concluded that Gen Z Soldiers desire NCOs who have high moral values and practice what they preach. More than 60% emphasized the importance of having leaders they can trust. They also stress the need for NCOs to have experience, knowledge, and skills in the areas they lead, which will build trust and demonstrate competence. Therefore, NCOs who want to lead the Army into the future must be honest, competent, and trustworthy. ■

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