



A U.S. Army Soldier with the 25th Infantry Division, conducts a team-building oriented Air Assault Obstacle Course at East Range, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, March 24, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Jessica Scott)

Building a Culture of Growth

By Sgt. Maj. Billy J. Atkinson, Retired Sgt. Maj. David L. Stewart, & Sgt. Maj. Victor J. Velasco

NCO Leadership Center of Excellence

“We win through our people, and people will drive success in our Readiness, Modernization and Reform priorities.” Department of the Army, 2019, p.1

As leaders continue to message that people are our biggest asset, a study conducted by the Center for Army Leadership (CAL) identified less than two-thirds of leaders are effective at developing their subordinates or recognizing their developmental needs (CAL, 2017, p. 12). The CAL research reveals the Army continues to struggle with developing its Soldiers. Army leaders continue to emphasize counseling, mentorship, and development but often do so to fulfill an obligation, to check the box, and don't take the time to foster emotionally intelligent Soldiers.

To fix this problem and change the Army's course, leaders should create unit environments where develop-

ment and emotional intelligence is an everyday activity. Only then will Soldiers feel trust, support, and encouragement to grow. This article describes an activity used at the Sergeant's Major Course that developed emotional intelligence and trust in students and can be adapted and implemented at the unit level Army-wide.

Building a Culture of Growth

A key factor in ensuring organizational success throughout the Army is establishing a culture that welcomes and accepts development. “In a growth culture, people build their capacity to see through blind spots; acknowledge inse-

curities and shortcomings rather than unconsciously acting them out; and spend less energy defending their personal value” (Schwartz, 2018, p.2). Growth culture development allows people to be genuine, open, and honest with their organization. This is not only the organization’s responsibility, but the individual’s as well.

Foundation

Developing a productive and positive organizational culture can be challenging, especially when bringing people together from all over the from a variety of backgrounds. To establish this culture, one must establish trust and a shared identity between a group of individuals, which is the key to establishing a growth culture (Department of the Army, 2019b). This begins with the organization’s leader. Without the leader’s full support, establishing this positive culture is near-impossible. A leader must understand growth culture is not the same as performance-based culture. According to Schwartz (2018), a culture solely based on performance is unhealthy and unproductive for an organization, as it often increases employees’ fear of failing, which hinders productivity. Thus, it is critical for organizations to focus on developing a culture centered on growth and not solely on performance.

A Solution

We conducted an emotional intelligence growth experiment while serving as instructors at the Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A). Our goal was to build a culture of trust and respect during a six-week education block. We took two classrooms and implemented a daily routine called the *check in* and *check out* method as defined in the book *An Everyone Culture*, by Robert Kegan and Lis Laskow Lahey (Kegan & Lahey, 2016) During the *check in*, speaking is voluntary, and students begin by stating their name. Although their classmates know who they are, this reminds individuals that speaking is voluntary. The students “may share an internal state, such as feeling excited or nervous... interior goals...something happening at home that represent how they are showing up at work” (Kegan & Lahey, 2016, p. 28).

Check in allows students to share their current state with the class to improve their presence in the classroom. Kagan and Lahey state this cannot be scripted because the practice loses its value, thus it needs to be authentic (2016). *Check out* is not as detailed as *check in*, but it allows the opportunity to share personal re-



Sergeant Major of the Army Michael A. Grinston, answers questions and discussed Project Inclusion, “This is My Squad” and force protection during a Facebook Live Town Hall conducted at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Aug. 3, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by David Gillespie)

flections and feelings at the end of the day. *Check in* and *check out* play a critical role in establishing a cohesive and trusting working environment, which increases and improves communication, creating a culture of growth aligning with Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael A. Grinston’s *This Is My Squad* (TIMS) initiative—aiming to build cohesive teams by sharing hardships and improving relationships by getting to know unit Soldiers (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2021).

Overall, the experiment was successful, and students developed a relationship of trust with both the instructor and their fellow students as they shared personal challenges or life events affecting their attentiveness in the classroom. Ultimately, *check in* and *check out*, or any other exercise that builds trust and camaraderie, equips leaders with the ability to identify risks and stressors early before they become unmanageable. Although we used this method in a classroom environment, organizations may apply adapted versions of *check in* and *check out* in any environment to build cohesive teams.

Conclusion

To develop a culture of growth, the Army must develop a safe environment based on trust, allow creative thinking, and provide continuous feedback focused on helping people grow. This responsibility does not fall only on the organization, but also on each individual. Soldiers must be open-minded, develop trust within the organization, and be committed to helping their unit grow. A positive culture and atmosphere will create better leaders and dynamic Soldiers ready for any battlefield. ■

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Sgt. Maj. Billy J. Atkinson is an instructor in the Department of Force Management at the Sergeants Major Course (SMC). He holds a Master of Science in Instructional, Design, Development, and Evaluation from Syracuse University, a Master of Arts in Management from American Military University, and a Bachelors of Arts in Homeland Security from American Military University.

Retired Sgt. Maj. David L. Stewart is an instructor in the Department of Force Management at the SMC. A retired sergeant major, his last duty position was as senior enlisted leader for the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic and for the Senior Advisor for Military Professionalism. Stewart is a Class 57 SMC graduate.

Sgt. Maj. Victor J. Velasco is an instructor in the Department of Force Management at the SMC. He received a Masters of Education in Lifelong Learning and Adult Education from Pennsylvania State University, and a Masters in Health Care Administration from Trident University. Velasco is a Class 69 SMC graduate and is currently pursuing his Doctorate in Education.



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