



Soldiers discuss mission plans before moving to a simulated objective during training at Pohakuloa Training Area, Hawaii, Oct. 18, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Rachel Christensen)

# Build a Ladder of Discipline One Rung at a Time

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Individual discipline has been the bedrock of unit success for as long as the U.S. Army has been in existence. One can argue that American military discipline was born when Gen. George Washington stood in front of the Continental Army for the first time, when they manifestly lacked in both discipline and military bearing (U.S Army Center of Military History, 2016). In Washington's own words, "Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak and esteem to all" (U.S Army Center of Military History, 2016, para. 5).

Despite its long history as a core value, many leaders struggle to bridge the empathy/discipline divide. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to developing disci-

pline within a unit, this article offers a five-step blueprint, or ladder, comprised of presence, competence, respect, mutual trust, and discipline to ensure success at every unit level.

## Rungs of a Ladder

There are two popular methods used by leaders to instill discipline in their organizations. They can demand discipline (through fear). Or they can earn it (by leading by example or from the front). The problem between the two methods is that earning discipline and respect takes much more work than simply leading through fear. But the payoff is greater because subordinates will be motivated and do even more than what is asked or required of them. Yet subordinates who live in a culture of fear may only do the

minimum to not get punished.

According to Ryan and Oestreich (as cited in Thomas, 2014), “Fear doesn’t motivate toward constructive action. On the contrary, it nourishes competition within an organization, fosters short-term thinking, destroys trust, erodes joy and pride in work, stifles innovation, and distorts communication”, (para. 5). To ensure leaders build a culture of trust and respect that can be climbed to success, they should follow these five easy rungs on a leadership ladder.

### Presence

Presence is not simply the physical manifestation of a leader showing up for “Monday Motor Pool.” That is the minimum representation of presence and leadership. Good leaders should want to be where they are needed the most: At the point of friction and growth. They should be where their Soldiers are to build genuine trust and positive relationships.

William Hickman (2020) describes the importance of presence stating it establishes an individual’s character, denotes his or her vision, and demonstrates the organization’s standards. They are paramount in building trust and credibility. It is impossible to achieve a level of technical and tactical competence in the eyes of subordinates if one is not present to demonstrate it.

### Competence and Credibility

During an episode of the HBO series *Band of Brothers*, the former commander of Easy Company, Capt. Herbert Sobel, finds himself disoriented during an exercise leading his company in the wrong direction (Farooqi, 2021). For those familiar with this series, it is obvious the Soldiers of Easy Company despise their commander. While he was present during their training, he was rarely involved. The moment his organization activated, and he had to lead as their commander and not as their drill instructor, his subordinates’ negative perceptions and worries about him became true. This emphasizes the point that competence and credibility are important and why they appear as a foundational-level skill on the ladder to discipline.

### Respect

While the Army Values define respect as treating others the way you would treat yourself, for the sake of establishing discipline, it represents a form of inherited credibility (Department of the Army, n.d.). This pays homage to the phrase respect is earned, and as leaders, they should always try to earn the respect of those they lead.

“Earning respect as a manager is the quintessential



Army Lt. Col. Alexander Samms, second from left, commander of 10th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, and his soldiers recover an M68A2 line charge during a training exercise at the 7th Army Training Command’s Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, March 29, 2022. (U.S. Army photo by Markus Rauchenberger)

ingredient to reaching the top,” according to a Forbes article regarding respect in the workforce (Smith, 2013, para. 2). Leaders should understand that respect is not synonymous with promotion. It is not simply awarded the moment a Soldier becomes an NCO. It is earned over time, like all good things in life.

### Mutual Trust

Trust is something the Army acknowledges as extremely important to mission accomplishment. In fact, the word “trust” appears 19 times in *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0: Mission Command*, and another 13 times in *ADP 6-22: Army Leadership and the Profession* (Department of the Army, 2019a; Department of the Army, 2019b). While earning the trust of their Soldiers should ultimately be a leader’s goal, it’s more important to establish a disciplined team through mutual trust. According to Ostlund (2018), mutual trust represents a level of shared confidence with regards to executing a mission or task between leaders and their subordinates. Subordinates trust their leader, and a leader trusts the subordinates.

For many senior NCOs, there is often a fear in allowing subordinates to operate with autonomy. But to be ready for the future fight, in most likely a degraded or contested operating environment, leaders must be comfortable with allowing, or training, their subordinates to lead as well. This level of trust is the cornerstone of mission command and the decentralized execution of commander’s intent.

### Discipline

At this point in the leadership ladder, leaders made themselves present, developed competence in them-

selves and the team, earned their subordinates' respect, and established mutual trust. While the first four rungs represent an approach to achieving discipline, discipline itself should also be developed.

Leaders can demand discipline from an organization, but without putting in the time and effort, it will continue to elude them. Even orders and objectives will come across differently depending on leader is issuing them. If an absent leader tells Soldiers to clean their weapon after a mission the task sounds tedious, and perhaps unnecessary, especially if it comes from a leader they do not admire or respect. However, if this task comes from a leader Soldiers respect, one who leads from the front, the task is viewed as a necessity, and respect is given, most likely because that leader is doing the task with them.

When leaders are compassionate and take the time to build trust, subordinates now execute not from a place of fear, but from a place of respect and a desire to please. Fear-based leadership will only get subordinates

to do the bare minimum, so they don't suffer punishment. Respect-based leadership inspires subordinates to go above and beyond expectations because they want to please their leader and contribute to their team and mission (Brearley, 2018).

## Conclusion

While discipline is still one of the most critical aspects of a successful military, many leaders go about instilling it the wrong way. Presence, competence, respect, and mutual trust are four essential qualities leaders must demonstrate before discipline occurs. Building a culture of respect and mutual trust is worth the time and effort. Work on one ladder rung at a time. Not only do you develop yourself as a leader and role model, you mold your subordinates and provide them the tools they'll need when they eventually take your place. You'll leave every unit in a better state than when you came on board. ■

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