



Soldiers during Eager Lion, a multilateral exercise in Jordan, Sept. 13, 2022. Trustworthy leadership is essential in exercises such as these and on the battlefield. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Anthony Prater)

The C.U.R.E. for Distrust

Communication, Understanding, Respect, and Expertise

By Capt. Andrew J. Bibb

“I would die for this man and 100% [he] is someone I want to fight with me on the battlefield. I have the utmost respect for him and strive hard to make him proud.”

2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division

This comment, written by a junior enlisted mortarman about his section leader in our unit survey explained later in the article, illustrates the centrality of leadership as “a multiplying and unifying ele-

ment of combat power” (Department of the Army, 2019, 5-2). It is the one element without which organizational trust is impossible to achieve. This truth shaped the words and behavior of our first Commander-in-Chief,

Gen. George Washington, and is now woven into our doctrine and culture. Both Washington and Soldiers with the 2nd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division agree: trustworthy leadership is essential to battlefield success. Synthesizing feedback from Soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Division and Washington's classic advice to his troops, this article explores each of the four communication ingredients, understanding, respect, and expertise and their interaction to promote effective and trustworthy leadership.

U.S. Army Leadership

The fact that the U.S. military recognizes leadership as a key element of combat power explains much of the success we have enjoyed as a fighting force. The difficulty is in determining what practical steps leaders can take to build organizational trust to the degree it produces tangible effects on the battlefield.

Throughout a year-long process of discovering the foundational pillars to building organizational trust, a team surveyed hundreds of Soldiers in the 2nd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division. Four elements presented themselves as indispensable: communication, understanding, respect, and expertise. When woven into an organization's culture, they produce the kind of trust necessary for aggressive, adaptable, and lethal action on the battlefield.

Two primary sources drive this conclusion. First, the Soldiers provide raw and unbiased feedback expressing the qualities exhibited by leaders who drive them to excel. Second, Washington's advice to a newly appointed colonel at the start of the War for Independence shows, leaders should try to understand the social dynamics of military leadership and how to navigate human nature.

Identifying the Problem

The comment at the beginning of this article came from 2nd Brigade Soldiers' feedback through organizational culture surveys regularly conducted by the unit. They are administered in person by brigade staff duty officers and consist of four questions updated every few months. Past questions include: "How would you like to receive information about what's happening in the brigade?" "If you could change one thing about the brigade in the next month, what would it be?" and "Who is your Chaplain? Would you go to them for help if you needed it?"

The surveys are part of a larger project run by the Brigade Culture Engagement Team (BCET). The purpose of this small task force, created and employed by the brigade commander, is to understand social and leadership dynamics within the brigade, identify key areas of concern, and propose actionable solutions. It does this through leveraging a messaging and



Spc. Kyle Romer, assigned to the 20th CBRNE competes during a Best Squad Competition at Fort Hood, Texas, Aug. 17, 2022. Soldiers excel in intense environments when supported by strong and trustworthy leadership. (U.S. Army photo by Pvt. Kyler Hembree)

feedback loop that enables constant assessment of the effects the commander's messages have on Soldiers at the team and squad levels, or whether they reach their target audience at all.

BCET messaging efforts communicate the commander's priorities, working parallel to and in support of traditional command channels. They prioritize accessibility and use the vernacular of the target audience, junior enlisted soldiers. Messaging mechanisms include the official brigade podcast, "Not Your Commander's Podcast," social media campaigns run by the public affairs officer, and the centralized brigade resources online repository.

BCET feedback mechanisms allow the commander to understand his Soldiers' attitudes and perceptions. They include the culture surveys, an online organizational trust survey, and direct engagement with Soldiers of all ranks. Through these mechanisms, the BCET enables the commander to identify and address concerns of particular importance, such as improving security for females living in the barracks and removing toxic leaders from positions of authority.

The BCET has been particularly focused on identifying and learning from noncommissioned officers (NCOs) who display exceptional ability to foster combat-ready trust within their formations. They want to know what the problems are, who is already part of the solution, what they are doing right, and how we can amplify their influence across the brigade.

The C.U.R.E.

Since May of 2021, the BCETs have done this by including this question in their surveys: "Who is an NCO you are proud to work with and why?" So far, approximately 400 Soldiers have responded. The answers, typically given by junior enlisted Soldiers, vary in the

details but always center on their trust for the NCO. The reasons they give often consist of two or more of the four elements of organizational trust, regardless of whether the NCO referred to is a new team leader or a battalion command sergeant major: communication, understanding, respect, and expertise.

Communication

The most common complaints the BCET receives have to do with communication across echelons. In an organization as large as a brigade combat team, made up of approximately 4,500 Soldiers, it is easy for information to be lost before it gets to junior Soldiers. NCOs identified in surveys were those who not only took information dissemination seriously but went out of their way to discover what was happening throughout the organization so they could maximize their subordinates' awareness.

Survey responders often equate constant communication with care for subordinates. One junior enlisted combat engineer specifically mentioned his platoon sergeant's commitment to communication as proof that he always "puts his guys first." Likewise, an infantryman said he would "definitely take a bullet" for his platoon sergeant and team leader because they "both care for their Soldiers." He referenced the "great communication within the platoon" as evidence of this.

The ability to communicate demonstrated by these NCOs goes beyond just conveying information. The authors of *Building the High-Trust Organization* explain, "It is not only truthful communication, but truth with timeliness, and in a manner that is readily accessible and understood" (Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2010, p. 83). Washington (1775) thought the same and, commanding nearly 30,000 soldiers when he wrote *From George Washington to Col. William Woodford*, encouraged officers to "be plain and precise in your orders" (para 2). This proves communication is a timeless foundational pillar of effective leadership. And in an organization as large as a brigade, a communication failure at any level means everyone further down the organizational hierarchy is unaware. Simplicity and precision mitigate this risk.

Understanding

Understanding is dependent upon, but not synonymous with, effective communication. Understanding goes a step further. In general, to understand is to comprehend a person, thing, or idea sufficiently to interact with it meaningfully and effectively. To understand one's subordinates is to comprehend what motivates them and know their strengths, weaknesses, interests, and goals (Bibb, 2021).

Understanding is gained through paying attention. When we pay attention, we acti-

vate our cognitive capability to grasp reality, articulate what we find, and interact with it. Understanding is not something we can force, but it follows naturally from paying deliberate attention.

We pay attention to whatever we deem important and, either consciously or subconsciously, ignore the rest. We also care whether we are the object of someone else's attention because we take this as an indicator of our value to them. We pay attention to things we deem important, so receiving attention makes us feel as if we are among those important things.

Subordinates know supervisors value them if they feel understood. One junior Soldier knew his supervisor cared about him because he asked him "personal things when doing counselings." A female Soldier, in an organization largely comprised of males, appreciated how her supervisor "actually sounds like he cares about what I have to say. He doesn't single me out as a woman and respects my position."

Understanding should not be confused with automatic compliance. Leaders may understand their subordinates' concerns without changing their minds and still reap dividends of trust. Washington (1775) recognized this and encouraged his officers to hear soldiers' complaints. If "well-founded, redress them; if otherwise, discourage them, in order to prevent frivolous ones" (para. 2).

Respect

Washington's (1775) guidance on how to show respect for subordinates is highly practical. He believed the "best advice" he could give was "to require nothing unreasonable of your officers and men, but see that whatever is required be punctually complied with" (para. 2). This guidance provides a formula for balancing individual dignity, rights, and liberties with Soldiers' duty to their country.



Capt. Naseyah McMillan, executive officer for HHC, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade, conducts a survey about barracks amenities, Nov. 16, 2019. Subordinates know supervisors value them if they feel understood. (U.S. Army photo by Emily LaForme)

First, and underlying all other considerations, is reasonableness. Military leaders must determine whether the ends they need to achieve require extraordinary sacrifice from their subordinates or if they are imposing undue hardship on them. If the latter, Washington would advise against it.

However, if sacrifice is required then leaders show respect for their subordinates by explaining why such sacrifice is necessary. Contrary to the military leadership norms of his day, Washington “called upon the ideas of the cause, God, family, and country to motivate the soldiers and enjoin them to abide by orders and regulations” (Shultz, 2015, p. 110). There is no question he demanded much of his Soldiers. But he left no room for doubt as to the purpose of their sacrifice, advising his subordinate leaders to “impress upon the mind of every man, from the first to the lowest, the importance of the cause, and what it is they are contending for” (1775, para. 2).

Soldiers feel respected when their leaders give them a worthwhile purpose for the work they do and a reason for actions taken. One Soldier in the brigade described his NCO as “fair and just” because of his ability to do this. Another described his supervisor as “serious and strict when it matters” and he “really cares for every Soldier under him.” In the latter case, it is worth noting the Soldier did not view strictness and care for soldiers as mutually exclusive, but instead saw them as cooperating forces.

Expertise

“Can I trust my leaders not to get me killed for no good reason? Can I trust them to prepare me for combat? Are they committed to excellence in their craft?” These are the kinds of questions Soldiers ask themselves when they arrive to a new unit, and the answer is a key factor in overall trust.

The most common response Soldiers gave to the question of why they respect and trust certain NCOs and not others was expertise. If supervisors were communicative, understanding, and respectful, but

only mediocre at their jobs, they were not trusted in a professional capacity. It was those who had these other qualities and were great at what they did and inspired Soldiers to say things like “I want to be like them” and “I would happily follow them into combat.”

Washington modeled his commitment to expertise and demanded the same of his subordinates. He regularly assigned books on military strategy, operations, and tactics to his subordinates, and his own library was full of them. Patriotic zeal and good intentions were not enough. The ongoing acquisition of “knowledge necessary to the Soldier” was required if the Army was to achieve tangible results (1775, para. 3).

Expertise that is not gained cannot be passed along. Conversely, one who has both expertise and the ability to teach it to others is a force multiplier. One Soldier said of his team leader, “He helps me to improve my work performance” and is “an excellent mentor.” This team leader manages to combine expertise with communication, understanding, and respect. This quality instills confidence in his Soldier. Similarly, another team leader “is a very knowledgeable NCO who spreads it to the rest of his Soldiers.” The result is that he leaves “them better off than how he found them.” This is perhaps the most telling measure of effectiveness for a leader.

Conclusion

Both Washington and the Soldiers of the 2nd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division agree: trustworthy leadership is essential to battlefield success, and the necessary ingredients are communication, understanding, respect, and expertise. When one or more of these elements is missing, trust in leadership is deficient. But organizations in which they are all leveraged, are organizations ready to deploy, fight, and win. However, just as Washington kept the cause of liberty foremost in the minds of his Soldiers, so must modern military leaders impart purpose to those they lead. ■

References

- Bibb, A. J. (2021). *It's not coddling to care: Why "engaged leadership" creates stronger military units*. Modern War Institute. <https://mwi.usma.edu/its-not-coddling-to-care-why-engaged-leadership-creates-stronger-military-units/>
- Department of the Army. (2019). *Operations* (Army Doctrine Publication 3-0). https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN18010-ADP_3-0-000-WEB-2.pdf
- Shultz, A. T. (2015). *George Washington and the establishment of civil-military relations in relation to the Declaration of Independence*. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA623955.pdf>
- Shockley-Zalabak, P. S., Morreale S. P., & Hackman, M. Z. (2010). *Building the high-trust organization: Strategies for supporting the five key dimensions of trust*. Jossey-Bass.
- Washington, G. (1775). *From George Washington to Colonel William Woodford, 10 November 1775*. Founders Online. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-02-02-0320>

Capt. Andrew J. Bibb is a civil affairs officer in the 82nd Airborne Division who has deployed to Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, the Arabian Peninsula, and Latvia. His work has been published in a variety of respected outlets including *Small Wars Journal*, *19FortyFive*, and the U.S. Congressional Record. His article titled “It’s Not Coddling to Care” was one of the 2021’s top ten most-read articles at *West Point’s Modern War Institute*.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

