Soldiers share a moment of excitement upon completing their time at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, LA. Camaraderie and esprit de corps are paramount to the development of soldiers during tough training.

The Empathy Challenge

Empathy-Informed Leadership in a Doctrine-Shaped Army

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Leadership is hard. Honing leader skills, attributes, competencies and behaviors takes demanding work, practice and intentionality. Leading well—influencing others by providing purpose, direction and motivation—necessitates attention to leadership as both an art and a science (Department of the Army, 2019). As a science, leadership requires knowledge of doctrine, codes, systems and policies that govern institutions. As an art, leadership demands awareness of oneself and others and understanding of people under one's care, with tact to know how to enact the science of leadership effectively.

As a leadership competence, empathy bridges the art and science of Army leadership. Unfortunately, effective empathy-informed leadership is learned too late

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for many in leadership positions. This is problematic. Leaders without empathy fail to see the humanity in their organization, while an overly empathic leader may fail to instill standards and discipline. Too little or too much empathy drives distrust, disconnection and dysfunction. This can lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms, increased suicidality and mission failure.

Developing abilities to lead as a scientist and artist is not automatic when one commissions, promotes or receives new authority. It must be nurtured and developed. Effective empathy-informed leadership is developed by teaching and encouraging empathy skill acquisition to personnel at every rank. This should begin when they join the Army and continue until they retire. Just like building muscles in our bodies, leadership requires focus and exercise. Gym-goers aspire to build muscles, but many seek shortcuts and quick results because they cannot do the work. Ronnie Coleman, an eight-time Mr. Universe, said, "Everybody wants to be a bodybuilder, but no one wants to lift these heavy weights."

This statement directly applies to empathy-informed leadership. Army policy assumes that once one has achieved certain ranks or positions, one will suddenly know how to effectively show empathy for others and use empathy as a leadership tool. This is a dangerous assumption because leaders must be able to identify with their subordinates' situations and emotions and establish trust within their organizations. For this reason, empathy should be a skill mastered at every level and should no longer be an assumed competency.

Distinguishing Empathy from Sympathy

Empathy is not sympathy. Empathy is the ability to relate deeply to another and oneself by feeling with instead of for. One popular scholar of empathy, Dr. Brené Brown, published a video on empathy that has since become well-known. Brené outlines that empathy requires four steps (Brown, 2013).

The four steps are:

1. Perspective-taking
2. Listening instead of judging
3. Recognizing a common emotion
4. Communicating the familiarity of the feeling of that emotion.

Neuroscientists add to this by explaining how empathy occurs when "the emotion center [of the brain] perceives the feelings of others and the cognitive center [of the brain] tries to understand why they feel that way and how we can be helpful to them" (Miller, 2019). The philosopher Martin Buber explains empathy through his work on the philosophy of dialogue. "Empathetic relationships maintain an intimate 'I and Thou' posture, versus a distant 'I and It' posture" (Reiss, 2017). Empathy humanizes situations because it honors individuals' dignity, shows them respect and enables listeners to understand another's pain.

In Army culture, experiencing and expressing emotions is historically associated with "weakness." On the contrary, displaying empathy is not what many deem as "soft." Rather, even Army doctrine codifies empathy as a leadership skill. ADP 6-22 defines empathy as "when an Army leader can genuinely relate to another person's situation, motives or feelings" (Department of the Army, 2019). Doctrine states that empathy allows leaders, or anyone, to "anticipate what others are experiencing and feeling and gives insight to how decisions or actions affect them" (Department of the Army, 2019).

Doctrine implores leaders to put themselves in Soldiers' situations or thought processes before taking an action that could affect Soldiers' careers or how they provide for their families. That does not mean giving Soldiers whatever they want or forcing leaders to "give in" to Soldiers because they are going through challenging times. Rather, displaying empathy-informed leadership balances understanding of the other with the organization's policies and interests. This is the art of leadership. Cultivating empathy as individuals and as an organization allows for elevated, people-first decision-making.

The "Empathy Issue"

The Army demands a lot from its leaders. Whether

U.S Army Soldier from 330th Transportation Battalion embraces his daughter following a nine-month deployment supporting Operation Atlantic Resolve. Empathy-informed leaders put themselves in Soldiers' situations before taking an action that could affect Soldiers' careers or how they provide for their families.

commissioned, noncommissioned or warrant officer, once deemed a "leader," individuals must execute both the art and science of leadership. Yet, many—especially junior leaders—have only recently learned of the science of leadership. Even though these Soldiers know doctrine, policies and the technical aspects of their jobs, they have not learned the art of leadership in theory or practice. This includes the effective use of empathy.

Vulcan Forge, a multi-day exercise conducted by the 81st Readiness Division's Mission Command Support Group, where Soldiers learn about building effective communication and practice active listening, validation, and empathy. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Crystal Harlow)

Look at the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) corps for an illustrative example. The Army identifies all NCOs as leaders beginning at the rank of Corporal. Many of these NCOs do not wish to be leaders and, in some cases, should not be. The Army does not have a straightforward leadership course to teach these NCOs the intricacies of leadership, such as how to care for your people to be effective leaders. Many young NCOs view themselves as managers or bosses, not leaders. They may be compliant with their technical job but not committed to the profession, learning to be leaders and caring for people. These Soldiers need to learn how to embody the oath of enlistment, the Army Values and the NCO Creed. These oaths, values and creeds are viewed as statements that Soldiers memorize to attend promotion boards. One could argue that those not ready for leadership positions should not attend promotion boards. However, to properly manage the force and balance recruiting and retention goals, Soldiers in the primary zone for Sergeant and Staff Sergeant must attend promotion boards regardless of their desire to lead or not lead fellow Soldiers.

Board appearances trigger a Professional Military Education (PME) date. These courses are more technical and provide very little leadership training. Still, even that requirement has now been waived. This allows "leaders" to get promoted without the required schooling for their next grade. When do we expect these young Army leaders to learn the art of leadership? When does that leadership training come if Soldiers are promoted without requisite schooling?

Some might say on-the-job training (OJT) is the answer, but add operations tempo, constant personnel changes, unpredictable training cycles and many other distractions, and leader development ceases to exist. Additionally, there is no distinction between Soldier, follower or leader above the rank of sergeant. Everyone gets lumped into this category with limited training and experience. Yet, young Soldier leaders are expected to understand all facets of leadership, including empathy, without proper training. Ultimately, these Soldiers are simply trying to their jobs, nothing more and nothing less.

The Army's officer corps experiences similar phenomena. Since new lieutenants are commissioned into the Army in various ways, each officer receives different formation prior to their commissioning. The United States Military Academy (USMA), Officer Candidate School (OCS) and Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs each follow similar curricula. However, the context and execution of said curricula differ by location and instructor. This includes differing emphasis on the science of leadership versus the art of leadership. Diverging emphasis continues after commissioning, depending on the branch. Some basic officer leadership courses emphasize soft skills like empathy over hard skills like targeting, and vice versa as branch needs dictate. Often, it is not until the Captain's Career Course, or even the pre-command course, that empathy-informed leadership is first mentioned. This means that many officers are only just beginning to think about the effective use of empathy as they take their first command. Any knowledge of empathy-informed leadership prior to this point is assumed knowledge, as previously discussed.

In other words, most officers have been in positions of leadership over enlisted personnel for an average of seven years before the Army invests in teaching them empathy. This is concerning because, even as platoon leaders or staff members, officers encounter situations with their Soldiers that necessitate empathy balanced with doctrine. It is easy for junior officers to be overly or under-empathetic without thoughtful instruction.

Soldiers may assume that empathy has no place in Army leadership without proper development. They may think that discipline and empathy are at

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odds or that empathy takes precedence over doctrine. These assumptions negatively inform decision-making processes. Disciplinary action, personnel and assignments and unit morale will all be affected. Unit cohesion and trust will falter. It must be cultivated.

Cultivating empathy builds trust by establishing a sense of safety, respect and compassion. For example, should health and welfare tent inspections be conducted in a deployed environment on Mother's Day morning? Let us consider variables as good empathy-informed leaders.

- Did unit leaders think about the timing of the inspection?
- Did it have to happen that day if no training was scheduled?
- Did unit leaders identify with Soldiers who were mothers away from their children?

It is the Army. These "leaders" can do what they choose. But consider the example. Would the Mother's Day inspection promote healthier climates? Would it build trust? Would these Soldiers feel cared for? Likely not.

Empathy communicates concern for an individual's well-being. If individuals know their leaders are genuinely concerned about their well-being and perspective, they are likelier to trust their organization. Conversely, distrust forms. This distrust is not due to incompetence. It is due to not feeling seen.

Trust is imperative. Trust is necessary for safety. Without safety, there is no room for failing, healing or growing. There is no room for disciplined initiative and calculated risk. Without room for development, no emotional, thoughtful or creative outlet exists. With no outlet, people become isolated and bitter. Isolation erodes community support and, at individual levels, contributes to mental health challenges, alcoholism and other destructive behaviors. Therefore, one's ability to effectively leverage empathy has tangible consequences for Soldiers' well-being and their families, who, by extension, are entrusted to officers' care.

Army leaders from across time can rattle off examples of events during which Soldiers got in trouble, requested something out of the ordinary or made poor decisions affecting their units' overall readiness. It happens every day in our business. There should be no question that Soldiers of all ranks should and will be held accountable for their actions. AR 600-20 requires leaders to enforce standards.

Case Study in Empathy: Family Support and Deployment Manning

The following case is based on a real situation that CSM Tilghman and Chaplain Page encountered. We present the situation, our initial reactions from distinct perspectives and how the situation was resolved by balancing empathy and policy.

All names and identifiers have been changed or removed to protect privacy.

Thirty days prior to deployment, the unit supply sergeant informed his CSM that he and his wife were struggling to conceive and recently enrolled in fertility treatments. The supply sergeant requested that he be allowed not to deploy so he could remain with his wife to provide support during treatments, appointments and hopefully forthcoming pregnancy. This was before the release of Army Directive 2022-06 (Parenthood, Pregnancy, and Postpartum), which addresses this topic.

The chaplain's initial reaction: *"This situation was challenging for me as I weighed the well-being of this Soldier, the well-being of the unit and my command. I could hear the excitement in this NCO's voice as he celebrated that he and his wife were finally eligible to receive fertility treatment. His desperation was palpable as he urgently expressed why he needed to be removed from the deployment. At the same time, in the office next door, our S1 team was already working around the clock to fill the ever-growing vacancies. In the command suite upstairs, frustration grew as plans derailed just one month before deployment. I firmly believed both parties' myriad of charged emotions were valid, and all had rational explanations. Ultimately, one party will be more upset by the situation's outcome. After listening to the supply sergeant, I assessed that it would have been healthiest for both him and his family for him to stay with his wife. He would be distracted at best on deployment, so I recommended to the unit that someone else be sent in his stead."*

The CSM's initial reaction: *"By the time of the supply sergeant's request, I had already spoken to five Soldiers who also requested not to deploy for various reasons or life events. The decision from the battalion commander for those five Soldiers, under my advisement, was that the reasons provided did not justify any of them remaining at the home station. When the supply sergeant presented his issue and made his request, I truly appreciated his situation. I have two sons and absolutely love being a father. I also thought it was brave of him and his wife to try fertility treatment. Fertility treatments are notoriously very difficult and stressful processes, and I respected his request. Of all the Soldiers who requested not to deploy, I felt this reason was the most legitimate and warranted further thought, discussion and analysis with the battalion commander, chaplain and our S1 strength manager."*

So, what happened?

The decision was made that the NCO would deploy. Further thought, discussion and analysis led to the following information:

The supply sergeant was the only supply-trained person in the unit. He had conducted and supervised all prior property layouts and inventories. He worked with

the property book officer to develop the forward and rear hand receipts. He was the only one with tangible knowledge of every property book item. There was no one with whom he could be swapped. A replacement from another unit was not available for at least three months.

The battalion commander and CSM discussed letting him sit out of the deployment. Part of the conversation discussed the perception of allowing him to stay back. In particular, with the five Soldiers who had already been denied the same request in mind. Concerns were raised over how allowing his request would impact the overall climate of the unit. The battalion commander and CSM agreed on the importance of fairness across the board. However, both felt the situation was different and decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis, not lumped together.

The battalion commander ultimately decided that the risk was too high, especially with property accountability, and decided to deploy the Soldier. In keeping with empathy-informed leadership principles, leadership knew that how they delivered this news to the supply sergeant would influence how he received the bad news.

A straightforward "no" void of empathy and explanation could generate resentment, isolation and relationship challenges. An uncertain "no" characterized by noncommittal language and a lack of ownership could generate confusion, stress and uncertainty during an already uncertain time. What was needed was an understated "no" that communicated a clear decision while providing context and an explanation for the Soldier, showing that his command was empathic to his request, took his specific situation into account, and thoughtfully considered the appropriate response.

Understandably, the supply sergeant was upset and disappointed. The unit's first sergeant and CSM took an empathy-informed approach, discussed the obstacles considered, and provided him with the "why" behind the decision. The command could have easily denied the request and moved on because that was best for the unit. However, at no point during their consideration did they remove humanity from the situation. The command demonstrated empathy in the art and science of leadership via their time to understand the Soldier and their commitment to the mission.

Way Ahead: Teaching Empathy from the Beginning

The Army cannot expect persons in leadership positions to develop empathy skills overnight. Rather, these skills must be taught throughout PME and training for enlisted and commissioned personnel. We propose that the Army develop a robust curriculum to teach empathy and effective empathy-informed leadership for personnel at all levels in every course. Expecting young Soldiers to learn empathy on the job after they assume responsibility is too great a risk.

Leaders need to remember what it is like to be a 20-year-old Soldier trying to figure out the world and the Army. We forget what it is like to be that young sergeant or new lieutenant, with all the pressures of life and the Army on their shoulders. We must use the Army's tools to exercise our leadership muscle to improve us, our units, and our Soldiers. A balance between good order and discipline and understanding our people must be struck.■

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