



Soldiers from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, recite the Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer during the Basic Leader Course graduation and lateral promotion ceremony July 30, 2021. The NCO Creed offers a blueprint for exemplary leadership and morale. (U.S. Army Photo by Spc. Preston Robinson)

The Solution to Recruiting and Retention is in the NCO Creed

By 1st Sgt. Robert T. Leonard

889th Quartermaster Company

Several times a month, the news highlights the military's recruiting problem. Often, an accompanying report notes how the institution is also bleeding experienced servicemembers. Recruitment and retention issues threaten our armed forces' lethality and its future. The question is clear:

What are we doing wrong?

The answer is just as straightforward: leadership deficiencies. After examining the data, this article finds a solution in a time-honored creed. The wisdom in a handful of sentences could be key to acquiring and retaining good Soldiers and leaders.

The principles outlined in the NCO Creed emphasize understanding and prioritizing Soldiers' needs, effective communication, fair recognition and punishment, and unwavering integrity. By adhering to these principles, the Army can create a positive environment that encourages retention and attracts recruits.

Triaging a Festering Wound

Over the past 20 years, recruiting numbers ebbed and flowed as the U.S. waged at least one major war at any given time – augmented by combat and support operations during the war on terrorism. Retention numbers also vacillated, and recently both plummeted.

In 2022, the Army fell 20,000 troops short of the goal established by allowable congressional funding (Winkie, 2022). The Army Reserve has not met recruitment goals since 2016 (Winkie, 2023). Department of Defense (DoD) numbers published for fiscal year 2023 show Army recruiting goals at around 70% and Army Reserve goals at just over 60% (DoD, 2023).

The military tried throwing a profit-and-loss business model equation at the problem through increased recruiting and reenlistment bonuses. The hope: An investment in pure numbers and infrastructure would pay off in long-term dividends.

The approach hasn't worked. Despite upping the ante to as much as \$50,000 and more for qualified applicants, recruiting and retention numbers continue to decline (Franklin, 2022).

It doesn't take a genius to arrive at a simple explanation: Soldiers are leaving because they aren't happy, and civilians aren't joining because they don't see or hear about happy Soldiers.

Some Soldiers, committed to service and duty, soldier on. Others, however, hang up their boots at the end of their initial tour of duty in favor of more lucrative options and the perception of more rewarding civilian employment.

Most depart at the end of their first tour, right about when they have gained the experience and knowledge to become leaders and subject-matter experts. The Army sends them to technical and leadership schools, puts them into management and leadership positions – and then loses them.

Two recent surveys bear these ideas out. In 2021, the Department of the Army Career Engagement Survey (DACES) polled more than 50,000 Soldiers on questions regarding military service satisfaction and



Sgt. Maj. Esmeralda Vaquerano, G-1 sergeant major for the District of Columbia National Guard, recites the noncommissioned officer creed during the noncommissioned officer induction ceremony at the Washington, D.C. Armory, December 10, 2023. Leaders that adhere to the NCO Creed cultivate a positive and supportive environment that encourages retention and attracts new talent to our ranks. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Noel Williams).

how it affects decisions to stay in or leave the military (Vie et al., 2021). An additional survey of about 500 junior officers in 2023 by Capt. Lindsay Gabow filled in what she perceived as gaps in the methodology of the previous study (Gabow, 2023).

The results of both are telling. Gabow's findings show poor leadership as a primary reason junior leaders leave, with negative leadership responses between 40% and 70% for differing respondent groups (Gabow). The comprehensive DACES data shows Army-wide responses at more than 17% for poor morale being an "extremely important" reason to leave the Army (Vie et al., p. 63).

Now, those dissatisfied Soldiers who leave the Army may also be the most significant recruiting mouthpiece in the civilian world. Qualified candidates considering serving in the military are smart enough to talk to their neighborhood veteran or family member in addition to listening to a recruiter's sales pitch (whom they know is interested in filling quotas). If what candidates hear from people they know and trust isn't positive, they won't join.

Former Army officer and political scientist Raphael S. Cohen wrote, "concerns over low morale are not new and not unique to the Army." Even so, these seemingly complex issues boil down to simple causes: confidence in leadership and pride in mission success (Cohen, 2015).

The effect of mission success on institutional morale is beyond this article's scope, but *leadership* isn't. Cohen points to recent findings: "only 27 percent

[of Soldiers surveyed Army-wide] said their senior leadership have their ‘best interests at heart’” (Cohen).

We face a catch-22. The Army isn’t designed to prioritize Soldiers’ interests; it is designed to win wars. However, you can’t win wars without Soldiers. How do we recruit more and retain our good troops?

Changing the Narrative

Good Army leaders know the worst effect on good morale is ignorance of poor morale. A story of lousy leadership bounces around the barracks and spreads in formations quicker than COVID-19. Economic academia calls the phenomenon “narrative contagion.”

Nobel prize-winning economist Robert Shiller wrote, “Narratives generally take the form of some recounting of events, whether actual or fictional, though often the specific events described are little more than bits of color brightening a concept and making it more contagious” (Shiller, 2017).

All it takes is one interpretation of bad leadership conveyed believably with *bits of color* to make it contagious and infectious. Creating a viral narrative doesn’t require Academy Award-winning storytelling. Wired to consume and disseminate information, humans have survived for millennia by translating information about harmful things into easily understood nuggets and dispersing them quickly.

According to Shiller, “The human tendency to form simple narratives around even the most complex chains of events infects even the most analytical

minds” (Shiller, 36).

How do we stop the narrative contagion that categorizes the Army as a crummy place to join and stay? By getting back to the basics of good leadership.

The Answer is in the Creed

The NCO Creed is a remarkable distillation of everything a leader should be and do. While the text’s history is well-known and documented, officers and NCOs often ignore two critical passages. Together, they offer a blueprint for exemplary leadership and morale – and, in turn, retention and recruitment.

The first passage, from the second paragraph, reads, “I know my Soldiers and I will always place their needs above my own. I will communicate consistently with my Soldiers and never leave them uninformed. I will be fair and impartial when recommending both rewards and punishment.”

The third paragraph contains the second component: “I will not compromise my integrity, nor my moral courage.”

To appreciate the wisdom of these lines, consider additional insights from another source: the workforce. *Forbes* magazine identifies the top five factors for employee burnout, as revealed in a Gallup study based on responses from full-time workers (Crail, 2023):

1. Unfair treatment at work
2. Unmanageable workload
3. Unclear communication from management
4. Lack of manager support
5. Unreasonable time pressure

Anyone who has spent time in a combat arms unit or around infantry Soldiers might suggest, with a wink, the list accurately describes a typical day in the Army. However, the factors are no joke – they are serious ways to lose good Soldiers and not recruit suitable candidates.

Reread the factors. Now, reread the lines of the NCO Creed. As leaders, we can apply the creed directly to rectify these problems. It seems simple, yet some do not do it. We are burning out our future leaders by ignoring easy fixes.

Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory

What motivates our troops? What motivates them to stay? American psychologist Frederick Irving Herzberg posited a concept for business management that addresses both questions.

His “two-factor theory” revolves around a pair of separate but



Sgt. Jeremy Blevens and Sgt. Jennifer Ristau fill sandbags to fortify a mortar firing position. In their selflessness, great leaders embody the Army values by serving their subordinates and caring for those they lead. As the NCO Creed puts it, “I know my Soldiers and I will always place their needs above my own.” (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Sabrina Kosman)

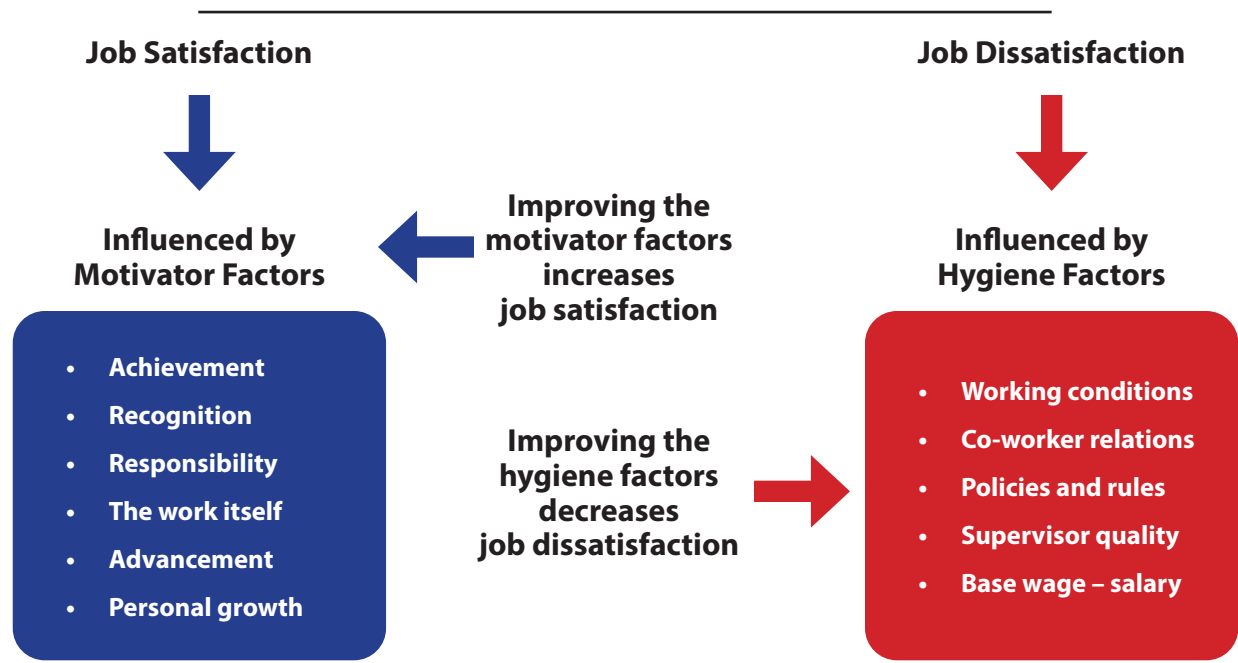


Fig. 1 Herzberg Two-Factor Theory

interdependent concepts. The idea applies to military organizations and can relate to the NCO Creed.

The two main elements are:

1. **Hygiene factors:** *unrelated to workplace satisfaction but necessary to prevent dissatisfaction*
2. **Motivator factors:** *directly related to workplace satisfaction (Kurt, 2021)*

By examining the sub-factors under the *Hygiene* and *Motivator* factors shown in Figure 1, it is clear the two parts of the NCO Creed discussed above address most of these critical areas. A nexus exists between the sub-factors and the statement, "I know my Soldiers and I will always put their needs above my own."

Let's address this. Leaders who are more concerned about receiving a negative NCOER/OER and make unnecessary decisions that lower morale are killing their units from the inside. If high-performing sergeants don't want to stay because of a hostile environment, they won't complete the Distributed Leader Course (DLC) 2 to get on the Advanced Leader Course (ALC) list. This neglect will impact their base wage and salary. Are your needs truly secondary to your Soldiers'? If the answer is no, there's an issue.

Being a good leader isn't easy. Embracing selfless service is essential to embodying Army values. This attitude means serving the country and subordinates selflessly.

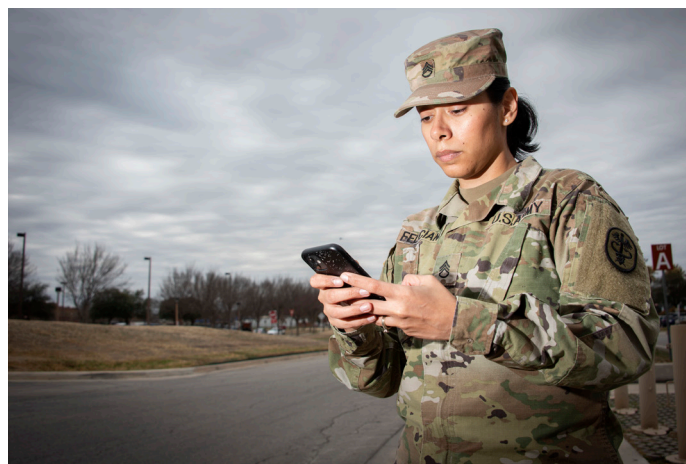
Putting someone else's needs above yours is the epitome of selflessness and is crucial for morale.

Consider every great leader you've encountered. They probably were not self-centered and didn't prioritize their promotions over their Soldiers' well-being. We should all strive for this standard, every day.

Communication

Communication is the singular and recurring confounding variable of every military misstep, every tactical and strategic blunder, and every Soldier's gripe at one point or another.

"I will communicate consistently with my Soldiers and never leave them uninformed," the NCO Creed states.



Staff Sgt. Erika Feliciano reviews an incoming text message at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, Jan. 20, 2023. Leaders need to communicate effectively and efficiently, as today's young Soldiers are used to instant information and rapid communication. (Department of Defense photo by Jason W. Edwards)

This sentiment is straightforward – and not practiced as often as it should be. The Army has developed communication methods ranging from warning orders to operations orders, fragmentary orders, and Commander's Intent. Yet, troops at the retention target level often feel overlooked (Gabow). Why? We don't always communicate effectively.

Some officers and NCOs are known to say things like, "They don't need to know that" or "I don't have time to explain that, just get it done." While understandable in a combat environment, such attitudes have no place in modern garrison settings.

Today's young Soldiers rely on instant information and rapid communication. Leaders cannot expect them not to be disgruntled with delayed communication when they are accustomed to immediate updates via their smartphones and watches.

Herzberg's hygiene factors emphasize *supervisor quality* as crucial. A quality supervisor or leader communicates effectively and, perhaps most importantly, efficiently.

Forbes lists *unclear communication from management* as the third factor in employee burnout. Addressing the problem is simple. Use your technology to keep your troops informed directly and consistently. Create easy-to-access databases for quick information dissemination.

Instant communication is an integral part of young Soldiers' lives. Become a part of it.

Carrots and Sticks

One of the first leadership and management techniques taught is the adage *praise in public, punish in private*. With this stalwart element of good management in mind, the operative question for Army leaders is not how but whom to praise. Punishment is straightforward if it is firm, fair, and directed by clear doctrine.

The NCO Creed says, "I will be fair and impartial when recommending both rewards and punishment."

Fair and impartial rewards and punishment are crucial for positive morale. It's disheartening to witness deserving NCOs and officers have their awards returned by senior leaders who seek recognition for merely being near some action. This practice undermines morale and

discourages recognition of genuine achievements.

According to Herzberg's theory, recognition is a vital motivator. We hinder retention efforts if we fail to recognize our troops fairly and appropriately. The Army should not become a participation trophy organization, but it's crucial not to overlook genuine achievement. Sometimes, leaders prioritize personal credit over recognizing performers, which goes against the principle of putting Soldiers' needs first.

The new Integrated Personnel and Pay System (IPPS-A) streamlines award recommendations but doesn't address approval issues. Leaders should never compromise formal award requirements to inflate award numbers. Additionally, alternative ways to acknowledge achievements exist, such as Company

Commander's awards for platoon-level fitness or individual weapons qualification highest points achievement. These initiatives boost morale and provide valuable points for NCOERs. Local awards and company-level recognition can significantly impact morale and overall unit cohesion.

Recognizing achievement is essential for maintaining a healthy Army. They are easily distributable "achievement carrots" that foster a positive environment.



Staff Sgt. Alyssa Sarandos, a 3rd Infantry Division Soldier, shakes hands with Lt. Col. Sean M. Hollars at the award ceremony for the Expert Soldier/Infantry Badge at Fort Stewart, Georgia, Oct. 27, 2023. Recognition is vital for a healthy Army. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Benjamin Hale)

Integrity, integrity, integrity

"A true leader has the confidence to stand alone, the courage to make tough decisions, and the compassion to listen to the needs of others. He does not set out to be a leader, but becomes one by the quality of his actions and the integrity of his intent."

– Gen. Douglas MacArthur

Merriam-Webster defines *integrity* as "firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values; incorruptibility."

The NCO Creed states, "I will not compromise my integrity, nor my moral courage."

It is easy to see how MacArthur's quote, the definition of "integrity," and its specific reference in the NCO Creed align perfectly. Moral courage is simply an uplifting of integrity, an integral, necessary component.

That moral compass deep inside you should never waver; if it does, you must correct it immediately – for the Aristotelian virtue ethics aspect, but also because every eye is on you from below. The minute you waver,

you undermine any strides you made in Herzberg's category of supervisor quality. You will have zero quality in the eyes of your subordinates.

Conclusion

In the Army, we hold ourselves and our troops to high standards, striving to approach challenges with solutions in mind. Various theories and concepts have arisen throughout this discussion, but the solution remains straightforward: follow the NCO Creed. By embodying its principles, we can effectively retain and attract good Soldiers.

Here's a simplified breakdown:

1. Take the time to understand your troops

and prioritize their needs.

2. Foster open communication by regularly engaging with them and leveraging technology.
3. Recognize and praise their efforts frequently to boost morale.
4. Address poor performance promptly and fairly.
5. Uphold integrity and always do what's right.

By adhering to these principles, we can cultivate a positive and supportive environment that encourages retention and attracts new talent to our ranks.

Do the right thing.

Every. Single. Time. ■

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