



Army Sgt. Bill Daniels talks to children and family members after a farewell ceremony at the Fort William Henry Harrison Reserve Center gymnasium in Helena, Montana, Sept. 7, 2019. Knowing how to bid others goodbye is foundational for prioritizing people within an organizational culture. Great leaders understand the importance of welcoming others, thanking them, and recognizing their contributions when they transition.

People as the Priority

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In his first letter to the force, the Army's 40th Chief of Staff, Gen. James C. McConville, stated, "People are always my #1 priority" (U.S. Army, 2019, para. 4).

This reminded me of a conversation I had with a great leader and mentor who told me, "If I focus on the culture of the organization, the organization will take care of the mission." In another conversation this leader taught me how saying *hello*, *thank you*, and *goodbye* to people can be the foundation of how well we take care of people.

These words create a framework to make people the focus and the priority of an organizational culture. The following examples are lessons I learned from great leaders throughout my career.

Hello

Many organizations use town halls to unite people and provide venues where leaders can communicate with members and receive feedback. I've watched senior leaders introduce new team members during these events with so much detail it felt as if they were talking about longtime friends.

Hail and Farewells are military traditions in which leaders or sponsors introduce new members and say goodbye to those leaving the organization. This tradition helps integrate new teammates and their families (armywifenetwork, 2022). However, when many people arrive quickly, like during the summer transition rush, the *Hail* can become impersonal and rushed.

Town hall introductions like the one described earlier offer a more personal approach. Introductions can be detailed biographies describing character, accomplishments, and, most importantly, skills beneficial to organizations.

I've been lucky to serve with humble leaders who went out of their way to welcome teammates. I once saw a first sergeant wait at an airport terminal to greet a new platoon sergeant. He assisted the individual with his luggage and other tasks, ensuring he and his family settled into their temporary lodging.

I've also watched senior officers wait at airfield terminals—through multiple delays—to be the first to welcome new teammates or visiting colleagues to new countries. Phone calls, briefings, and meetings were all secondary to being the first person to welcome them on arrival.

Onboarding is the process of integrating new hires or employees into an organization (Maurer, 2015). Varying by organization, onboarding is vital for teaching organizational practices, structure, support, mission, and vision.

While in-processing at a unit, the human resources supervisor ushered me through my first day, from operations to logistics to a meet and greet with the leadership team. At first, I thought it was uniquely for senior members, but I soon realized every new member received the same treatment.

The human resources supervisor took the initiative, supporting the commander's intent and ensuring every new teammate integration was exceptional in the same way. These are only a few examples of how an organization went beyond Total Army Sponsorship Program requirements to make new team members feel welcome and accelerate integrating them as part of the team. It was their way of saying hello.

Thank You

Welcoming new teammates gives them a favorable impression of the organization. Telling them their efforts are appreciated helps build their commitment to the team. For centuries, armies worldwide have used awards to recognize courage, achievement, and exceptional service. In 1787, Col. David Humphreys wrote, "few inventions could be more happily calculated to diffuse the knowledge and preserve the memory of illustrious characters and splendid events, than medals" (Marvin,



U.S. Army paratroopers are inducted into the 173rd Airborne Brigade as "Sky Soldiers," March 24, 2022. Organizations should go beyond Total Army Sponsorship Program requirements and make new team members feel welcome, accelerating their feelings of being a part of the team. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. John Yountz)

T.R. & Son, 1875, p. 30). These words capture the sentiment of using awards to recognize and demonstrate appreciation for distinguished service.

Military leaders developed other incentive programs beyond regulatory requirements or limitations. The variety is remarkable, and two units with similar incentive programs can have different effects. In my experience, monetary incentives motivate people. In other situations, people prefer genuine recognition of real achievement.

I served during multiple deployments where there was an expectation of awards via military decorations based on deployment length, rank, or position rather than merit. Whether explicit or implied, such policies can harm unit culture, climate, and morale.

The best approach for recognition is a genuine acknowledgment of a Soldier's effort by a unit leader. Sometimes, a handshake for taking someone's shift during an emergency or staying late to catch up on vehicle or equipment services can shape a culture of gratitude in an organization. Hero of the Week recognition can boost many young Soldiers' morale. I've had conversations with Soldiers who felt proud and honored just to be recommended by their team leader, not knowing that anyone was even noticing their efforts. After a lengthy award ceremony, I asked one of my commanders if it would be better to shorten the event by combining some of the recognitions. The commander reminded me of the importance of taking the time to recognize individual effort. While the team is crucial, the combined effort of each individual moves an organization forward. The commander's

comments reminded me of the importance of placing as much emphasis on recognizing individual effort as we put on requiring individual effort toward mission accomplishment. In other words, we need to emphasize the thank you.

Goodbye

In addition to welcoming new teammates and showing them their efforts are appreciated, I've learned it's essential to recognize their contributions to the team when they transition. The Army People Strategy aims to enhance the Army's overall readiness and minimize unexpected skill shortages by leveraging technologies, incentive initiatives, and policies. The goal is to align Army personnel skills with field-specific talent requirements (The United States Army, 2019).

Despite efforts to address talent gaps in the field, leaders struggle to manage transitions. The Army's way to create predictability for Soldiers and their families as well as a predictable flow of required vacancies is through the assignment marketplace (HRC, 2023).

This flow creates a unit-level challenge: integrating newcomers into the organizational culture and training readiness activities. These vacancies hamper the organization's ability to support departing Soldiers and their families as they transition from the unit.

Unfortunately, if the organizational training calendar is intense and demanding, leaders, peers, and other unit members' attention may also be distracted from these transition tasks. One successful technique units implement is allowing departing personnel to forgo certain collective training events near their tour's end (so they can focus on their transition and family preparation tasks).

Organizations gain members' respect and loyalty through a culture that endures even as generations of leaders come and go. This culture forges strong attachments among individuals, making them reluctant to leave.

When they depart, they eagerly seek opportunities to return or to serve with others who also left. This situation reflects an organizational environment where people

are well cared for. The culture is about more than the mission or the equipment. What sets the organization apart is how individuals treat one another, hold each other accountable, and provide mutual support.

As a first sergeant, I once received a call from a command sergeant major (CSM) who wanted to introduce a sergeant departing his organization for my unit. I was surprised by the call and wondered if they were related or if he was a Sergeant Audie Murphy Club member. The answer was much simpler: The CSM was a leader of character who wanted to ensure his Soldier received a proper transition from his unit to mine.

As the senior enlisted member in my organization, I conducted exit interviews with departing NCOs. Exit interviews gave me an honest view of the organization from a different perspective.

I also knew commanders who allowed departing members to shape how their project transitioned or to recommend who took over their efforts. Even as these Soldiers left their units, they continued to take part

in the organization's future success. Many units attempt to create continuity through knowledge management but fall short. Creating ownership among team members is a much better approach.

Just as with the genuine introduction, how we say goodbye is critical to the organization's culture. I've seen leaders give detailed accounts of how a departing team member shaped the organization, their positive impact on the mission, and a genuine statement of gratitude going far beyond the award citation.

Leaders who read and explain award citation achievements give the narrative a different voice and flavor than a disinterested narrator whose primary concern is getting through the award citation with minimal mistakes. Those who make this kind of effort take a personal approach to thanking someone for their service to the organization.

Conclusion

We can learn from many leaders by observing how they do things and noting what works for them and what doesn't. Focusing on an organization's people and culture



Staff Sgt. Matthew McQuade (center), religious support NCOIC, Religious Support Office, U.S. Army Garrison Fort Hamilton, N.Y., is celebrated by friends after being awarded the Army Commendation Medal and Army Achievement Medal. The best approach for recognition is a genuine acknowledgment of a Soldier's effort by a unit leader. (U.S. Army photo by Mark Getman)

is a worthy investment. This article's examples may not suit every organization. However, they demonstrate that if we pay attention and observe leaders' actions, we can learn the methods they use to shape their organization's culture and make their people the priority.

Our challenge is to share those observations and do our best to duplicate efforts to get positive results. The most important lesson I've learned from observing great leaders is to be genuine and honest about saying *hello, thank you, and goodbye.* ■

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