



Humor can relieve stress in high-pressure environments, but dark humor may foster a hostile atmosphere if misused. Leaders should ensure humor doesn't compromise respect and professionalism in the ranks. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jose H. Rodriguez)

Taboo Language

By 1st Sgt. Esteban A. Aguilar

1st Battalion, 160th Infantry Regiment, 79th Infantry Brigade Combat Team,
40th Infantry Division

Language has the power to influence and change an organization. Leaders must carefully choose the words they use in the workplace (Allen, 2012). Inappropriate talk in the military creates an atmosphere ripe for misconduct. "Language breeds culture," as a *Canadian Military Journal* article puts it (Flor, 2017, p. 77).

This article analyzes misconduct using the notion of taboo language, which could foster inappropriate behavior in the military workplace. In *Swearing and Cursing*, Timothy Jay defines *taboo language* as words or phrases associated with profanity, blasphemy, obscenity, indecency, slang, endearment, sexual body parts, sexual behaviors, name-

calling, scatology, racism, sexism, or vulgarity (Jay, 2020).

The U.S. and Canada have made great efforts to eliminate sexual misconduct over the years. However, little attention is paid to the taboo language prevalent in military culture.

Taboo language preserves and perpetuates environments conducive to misconduct. It escalates inappropriate behavior that could result in harassment, assault, or a toxic workplace (Arbour, 2022; Brady, 2021).

This article discusses taboo language, misconduct, and how leaders should address the issue within their formations.

Taboo Language in the Workplace

It may be no surprise that in the military, or in American culture for that matter, taboo language is common (Calkins et al., 2021; Chirico, 2014; Flor, 2017; Graves, 1927; Jay, 1992).

An *Army Times* article by Ken Chamberlain, “Why swearing is f**king good for you,” asserts that taboo language fosters teamwork and trust, is normal and healthy, and even increases pain tolerance (Chamberlain, 2018).

Others suggest certain taboo language, such as sex jokes, fosters sexual misconduct in the workplace (Breslin et al., 2018; Deschamps, 2016; Schell et al., 2021).

Some argue not all taboo language is problematic, with social context a determining factor (Jay, 2020).

Taboo language may be appropriate during personal conversations but inappropriate in a professional setting. However, military leaders must not blur the use of taboo language during casual personal conversations outside the military workplace.

Taboo language in the military profession compromises organizational ethics and values. It can also discredit a leader’s competency or level of intelligence (Defrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019; Johnson, 2012; Stapleton, 2020). Leaders who don’t use taboo language foster more cohesive organizations that trust them.

Dark Humor

Another controversial aspect of military language is dark humor. An article in *Europe’s Journal of Psychology* defines *dark humor* as cynical comedy related to death, depressing life events, unpleasant circumstances, human suffering, irony, or absurd situations (Brigaud & Blanc, 2021).

Using humor is a common characteristic eliciting positive emotional reactions to downplay stressful situations, traumatic experiences, or death during war (Shpeer & Howe, 2020).

However, regular use of dark humor could result in a hostile workplace environment or misinterpretation in certain contexts. Benign violation theory (BVT) explains dark humor co-occurs when (1) a violation of social norms occurs, (2) the language is benign or harmless, (3) both prior conditions co-occur (Cheng et al., 2021; Warren & McGraw, 2016).

In other words, humor could be appropriate or inappropriate depending on the social context. It is a slippery slope that could be misperceived as an ethical violation.

Today’s American workplace culture is more casual than in the past. Prior research studies revealed that co-workers strengthened morale by verbally teasing and insulting each other through taboo words in the workplace (Plester & Sayers, 2007).

However, workers who were not considered to be part of the workplace in-group reported feelings of pain and frustration. The Theory of Normative Social Behavior (TNSB) explains how and why taboo language occurs in the workplace. Leaders should be aware of the concept.



Conversations that promote respect, diversity, and inclusion build a stronger team. Fostering camaraderie is essential, but leaders must also address taboo language that could harm the unit. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Caeli Morris)

Theory of Normative Social Behavior

Misconduct in the workplace can be explained through TNSB. According to Cho and Tian (2019), TNSB is a theoretical framework that moderates the relationship between descriptive social norms and behaviors.

The framework focuses on injunctive norms, outcome expectations, and group identity.

Injunctive norms refer to the perceived social rules of what a person believes they must follow based on what others expect of them. *Outcome expectations* are the belief that engaging in a particular behavior will influence positive outcomes. *Descriptive norms* refer to the perceived social rules of what a person believes they should follow based on what others do.

TNSB asserts that previous main perceptions could influence a person’s behavior based on pressures to conform, perception of receiving positive outcomes, and that the behavior supports an individual’s sense of in-group classification.

Based on TNSB, Soldiers are expected to support and use taboo language if they believe their co-workers reward what comes to be considered normative behavior in the workplace. Supporting taboo language creates the culture.

Workplace Culture

The Culture of Military Organizations defines *organizational culture* as the collection of attitudes,

beliefs, assumptions, symbols, behaviors, values, and social norms that influence how organizations function (Mansoor & Murray, 2019). It includes the collection of ideas conveyed through language and religion.

Culture can tell people *how* to behave while imposing sanctions on behaviors violating social norms in an in-group of people (Department of the Army, 2021). Soldiers are not born with culture – it is a sociological process learned over time and changes depending on individual and external factors (Worsley, 2023).

Organizational culture development is a slow process often revealing itself even if its members don't know it exists. Based on this notion, misconduct in the workplace leaves a trail of signs and indicators leaders should recognize before it is too late.

Workplace taboo language is a particular indicator. It is subtle and often benign, but it can compromise military integrity. A recent report found that negative attitudes toward women who work in Army Special Operations Command contributed to sexism, gender discrimination, and harassment (US Army Special Operations Command, 2021).

In the study, many women reported there were two negative stereotypes: They were considered either “aggressive” or “promiscuous.”

Continuum of Harm Framework

The negative attitudes, stereotypes, and taboo language used to define women in the military weaken unit morale and create hostility. Researchers assert that leaders could identify a pattern of indicators that could escalate to misconduct (Marineanu et al., 2023).

According to Breslin et al. (2018), the continuum of harm is characterized by a gradual increase in unwanted behaviors that breed sexual misconduct in the workplace.

Unwanted behaviors are escalated outcomes that stem from taboo language made up of sexist jokes, racist remarks, and dark humor against disabled people or other protected groups (Department of Defense, 2014). The cycle of harm continues and worsens if leaders fail to address taboo language in their organization.

Leaders should advocate and support efforts to examine the impact of language on their organization's culture, because taboo language is expected to influence and shape negative behaviors that breed misconduct.

Addressing Taboo Language as Misconduct

Taboo language could be charged as a crime under Article 134 – “indecent language” in the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) (Department of Defense, 2023).

Despite the criminal aspect and potential negative consequences of its use, taboo language is a common phenomenon across the U.S. Army. Leaders should take advantage of nonpunitive options if they want to foster

and support positive change in their units.

Commanders do not need to apply harsh penalties to discipline Soldiers who use taboo language. However, they should use Article 134 as a tool to stop the cycle that leads to potential misconduct.

Leaders could potentially use an escalation of discipline that starts with educating Soldiers, using verbal counseling, written counseling, and punitive options, such as court-martial proceedings for more serious offenses.

Documentation is essential in the Army. Leaders should focus on documenting misbehavior rather than relying solely on verbal counseling to address Soldier issues.

They should write it out when in doubt to prevent liability or accountability issues if misconduct is discovered and left unaddressed. Addressing misconduct also supports good order and discipline in the workplace.

Organizational Change

Senior leaders are responsible for maintaining good order and discipline in their formations. The little things matter and can escalate to more serious offenses if left unaddressed. It can be challenging to enforce Army standards and maintain good order in organizations with a pattern of protecting deep cultural traditions and noxious beliefs.

Traditions and beliefs that can undermine good order and discipline are related to the misconceptions of women serving in combat roles. Recent studies reported that many male Soldiers are resentful and do not believe women should be integrated into combat units (Kessler, 2022; US Army Special Operations Command, 2021).

Soldiers reported concerns that women could weaponize and report frivolous sexual harassment or equal opportunity violations. They also stated that integrating women into combat units would make



Leaders must document misbehavior to address issues and maintain good order and discipline in the unit. Counseling Soldiers on the consequences of taboo language helps prevent misconduct from escalating. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Bryan Henson)

maintaining good order and discipline difficult. Women reported that leaders commonly used derogatory words to label them as highly promiscuous or aggressive (U.S. Army Special Operations Command, 2021).

Regardless of the concerns, leaders are held accountable for everything they do or fail to do in their organization. They may face challenges in implementing and supporting organizational change prohibiting taboo language in the workplace. They may even experience pushback from senior leaders who struggle to let go of deeply rooted sexist or discriminatory beliefs that contradict Army values.

Senior leaders are responsible for implementing change and fostering organizations that support diversity, equal opportunity, inclusion, and respect for all Soldiers. Prohibiting taboo language in the workplace is a start.

NCOs' Role

Learning and increasing leadership competencies is challenging and sometimes comes with its share of failures. Early on in their careers, Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) learn the six core competencies to support the Army leadership framework of be, know, and do: readiness, operations, program management, training management, communication, and leadership

(Department of the Army, 2020).

Leadership is arguably the most challenging. Leaders are expected to manage and lead using the six core competencies, relying on various leadership styles to be the role models for the Army profession. Leadership and management are different but complementary systems that support each other (Kotter, 2001; Zaleznik, 1981).

Managers are normally good at systems, organizing reports, staffing, controlling, and solving problems. Leaders create a vision, clarify the big picture, build coalitions, and motivate and empower subordinates (Northouse, 2021).

NCOs must strengthen both characteristics and seek to be lifelong learners to effectively manage rapidly changing organizations. The Army is more professional than it was decades ago, and subordinates continue to expect more from their leaders.

Conclusion

Leaders who use taboo language in the workplace compromise the Army values and the Army profession. Recent studies reported a connection between misconduct and taboo language, such as sex jokes or derogatory remarks.

This taboo language breeds a culture of



Taboo language directed at female Soldiers fosters harmful behavior and undermines unit cohesion and professionalism. Leaders must challenge such conduct to maintain respect for all Soldiers and mission success. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Dustin D. Biven)

misconduct, and leaders must immediately address it before it escalates to serious misconduct. Dark humor, another type of language, elicits positive emotional reactions to downplay stressful situations, and it can also create a hostile work environment when people take it too far.

Leaders need to understand that language is socially constructed and regulated through perceived rules in social groups. The theory of normative social behavior explains how taboo language can be used to conform and be classified as part of a social in-group in the workplace.

Furthermore, culture can teach people *how* to

behave while imposing sanctions on behaviors that violate social norms in groups of people.

Leaders who fail to address taboo language contribute to the continuum of harm framework, enabling misconduct to escalate in the workplace.

Under Article 134 of the UCMJ, “indecent language,” using taboo language can be charged as a crime, and commanders should use it as a tool when necessary to stop a cycle that fosters misconduct. NCOs must be the standard-bearers and maintain good order and discipline by addressing taboo language before it weakens Army culture. ■

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1st Sgt. Esteban A. Aguilar is the company first sergeant of Angry Company, 1st Battalion, 160th Infantry Regiment, 79th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 40th Infantry Division. He served in various leadership roles over the past 14 years, ranging from team leader in the Regular Army Active-Duty component to infantry company first sergeant in the California National Guard. Aguilar holds a master's degree in organizational leadership from Brandman University and is a doctoral candidate in the Helms School of Government at Liberty University.



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