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Be Present and Show Genuine Care

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Sergeants Major Academy

Army leaders emphasize taking care of Soldiers as a fundamental responsibility. But what does that mean?

The answer varies, but leaders generally tie the concept to training, mentorship, support, and advocacy for the well-being of those under their charge. However, we can best understand the true depth of this commitment through personal experiences and moments that highlight its significance.

A Soldier's Trust

A line from "A Soldier's Request" — a contribution by Sgt. Maj. Frank M. McMahon to the Association of the U.S. Army (AUSA) — conveys a deep sense of trust: "I shall leave this Army knowing, with my last step and my last breath, that my fate was always safest in your hands" (McMahon, n.d.).

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their faith in them. This bond is forged not just in training exercises and on the battlefield but in quiet moments of vulnerability and hardship.

Leaders need to uphold their duty to care for Soldiers, not as a mere obligation but as a sacred commitment that defines their profession. By prioritizing Soldiers' well-being, leaders demonstrate they value Soldiers not as machines for war but as human beings deserving of care, respect, and support. This unwavering commitment separates exceptional leaders from the ordinary, shaping the character of the unit and the legacy of the Army.

Responsibility Comparable to Parenthood

What should parents do when their children are hospitalized? Be there. Understanding parental responsibility can inform our view of authority in the Army. Leadership expert Simon Sinek (2017) put it this way: "Every single employee is someone's son or someone's daughter. Like a parent, a leader of a company is responsible for their precious lives" (p. 19).

Army leaders are responsible for the well-being of those under their command. Leaders ensure their Soldiers' physical and emotional safety by providing support and guidance as parents would. Simply put, leadership goes beyond sitting behind a desk, replying to emails, and giving orders. It involves genuine care and concern for the Soldiers entrusted to your leadership.



Mission accomplishment is paramount, but true strength lies in readiness for battle and the empathy and compassion we extend to one another. Leadership must prioritize not only mission success but also the well-being of the people who make it possible. (U.S. Army photo).

Personal Experience with Soldier Care

Recently, one of my Soldiers was admitted to the hospital for suicidal ideation, prompting me to make daily visits to offer support and encouragement. Entering the visitation room required first calling for escort via an intercom.

On one visit, no one answered my call. I waited patiently, and just before calling again, the door opened. The escort said, "I knew it was you, sergeant major. You're the only one who comes."

After leaving the hospital, those words stayed with me. It didn't make sense that I was the only leader visiting, especially as several other Soldiers were receiving care. I wondered: *Are we doing enough?*

Mission accomplishment is paramount, but true strength lies in readiness for battle and the empathy and compassion we extend to one another. This experience calls for deep leadership that prioritizes not only mission success but also the well-being of the people who make it possible.

A Master Sergeant's Personal Experience

Rank structures ensure order, discipline, and efficiency. However, every Soldier is fundamentally human behind their uniform and rank insignia, with personal lives, emotions, and vulnerabilities.

This reality became clear to me while transitioning to a brigade staff, a situation that brought challenges.

During a difficult period, I sought behavioral health support. After several months of therapy, I was admitted to a seven-week inpatient treatment program. Despite my position and rank — a brigade level master sergeant — the only people who checked on me or my family were my first-line supervisor and a peer.

This experience taught me a crucial lesson. Regardless of rank, we are all susceptible to life's challenges. Military rank may confer authority and responsibility, but it does not shield us from the personal struggles everyone faces. Our experience does not make us immune to the anxieties, fears, and stresses of being human.

This episode revealed the need for empathy and human connection among leaders and Soldiers. While discipline and order are vital, so is recognition of each Soldier's



For young leaders, understanding begins with showing empathy during times of need, which is simple and profoundly impactful. Make it a habit to check in regularly with Soldiers, not just during crises but as part of routine interactions to build trust and show genuine care. (U.S. Army photo by Pvt. Jean Casimir)

humanity. Leaders at all levels must strive to balance their responsibilities with concern for the personal lives of those they lead. This balance is essential for Soldiers' well-being and the unit's morale and cohesion.

The lack of support I experienced during a critical time reminded me that leaders must do better. Every Soldier, regardless of rank, deserves to feel valued and supported, especially during times of personal crisis. A simple act of kindness or a few words of encouragement from a superior can make a difference, reinforcing a Soldier's sense of belonging and trust in the unit.

When leaders demonstrate genuine care and concern, they set a precedent for others to follow, creating a supportive environment where everyone feels seen and valued. This culture improves individual well-being and enhances the unit's effectiveness and resilience. It also helps retain Soldiers.

Practical Applications for Young Leaders

Retired Navy SEAL and author Jocko Willink wrote, "The best leaders understand the motivations of their team members and know their people — their lives and their families" (Willink & Bagin, 2017, p. 277). For young leaders, understanding begins with showing empathy during times of need, which is simple and profoundly impactful.

Make it a habit to check in regularly with Soldiers, not

just during crises but as part of routine interactions. Visit them in the hospital, attend family events, and be visible in everyday situations. These small acts of presence build trust and show genuine care.

Such routine presence is also paramount in finding out if Soldiers have issues. Ensure Soldiers feel heard by listening actively during conversations and following up on concerns. Additionally, foster a culture of support within the unit, encouraging peers to look out for one another and to be present during challenging times.

Young leaders can cultivate a strong, compassionate, and resilient unit by integrating these basic yet powerful practices into daily leadership.

Conclusion

Returning to the basics of leadership by being present and showing genuine care can profoundly impact Soldiers' well-being and the unit's overall effectiveness. The commitment to be there for Soldiers in times of need — to listen and act with empathy and compassion — builds trust and strengthens bonds.

This approach to leadership ensures mission success and fosters a supportive and resilient environment where Soldiers feel valued and understood. By embracing these principles, young leaders honor the sacred trust placed on them and carry forward the legacy of exceptional leadership in the Army. ■

References

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