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# Fostering a Culture of Respect and Recognition

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**P**eople are the most important asset in the Army profession. While the mission is significant, its success is intricately tied to those who execute it. It is vital to acknowledge the efforts of everyone contributing to the mission and the organization's success, regardless of rank, job, or position.

"People First" is a guiding philosophy that should be evident in our daily actions and decisions. By valuing and respecting the contributions of all Soldiers, we promote a culture of respect, which is indispensable for the Army's success.

The values and characteristics of our profession, even our NCO Creed, serve as the foundation for fostering a

positive environment. Their effectiveness lies in how we implement them in our leadership approach.

As Jonathan Fields, the co-founder of employee engagement platform Assembly, notes, "Through effective leadership styles, consistent positive feedback, and robust employee recognition programs, leaders transform their workplace culture into one that celebrates and honors the contributions of every individual" (Fields, 2024).

This approach upholds our core values and ensures every member feels valued and appreciated. NCOs play a crucial role in this transformation, influencing the culture of our formations and having a lasting positive impact on the organization.



## The People

“I know my Soldiers and I will always place their needs above my own.” This line from the second paragraph of the NCO Creed resonates deeply with me (NCO Creed — Army Values, n.d.). It underscores the importance of truly understanding the Soldiers we lead. To effectively know and support them, it is crucial to recognize the unique characteristics of the generation entering military service today.

Generation Z is becoming a significant part of our workforce, and many are stepping up to serve in the military. They bring different perspectives and expectations compared to previous generations. Gen Zers believe they’ve done something wrong if they don’t interact daily with their boss.

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**AT RIGHT:** Spc. Ashleigh Platt, 169th Field Artillery Brigade, is recognized as the September Soldier of the Month in the U.S. Central Command’s area of responsibility, Oct. 5, 2024. Everyone wants to feel valued, and recognition for one’s contributions to the team is always gratifying. Leaders boost individual morale through recognition, thus contributing to the organization’s overall success. (U.S. Army Photo by Sgt. Nicholas Ramshaw)

**BELOW:** To effectively know and support Soldiers, it is crucial to recognize the unique characteristics of the generation entering military service today. Feeling valued at work is closely linked to better mental health. Almost all employees are motivated to do their best when they feel appreciated. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Ben K. Navratil)

“This generation doesn’t shy away from rectifying its mistakes,” notes a post on the site of software development services company Chimera. Gen Zers “are always open to recognition — positive or negative” (Ramesh, 2022). Understanding and adapting to these traits is essential for effective leadership.

Everyone wants to feel valued during meetings, and recognition for one’s contributions to the team is always gratifying. However, understanding the psychology behind this is essential for fostering an environment



where people genuinely feel appreciated. Being proactive in this regard is crucial for effectiveness.

A 2012 survey by the American Psychological Association found that feeling valued at work is closely linked to better mental health. Almost all employees are motivated to do their best when they feel appreciated. Conversely, employees who do not feel valued are more likely to seek new employment (American Psychological Association, 2012). This survey highlights the significant impact of valuing people on the organization and individuals.

A study by London-based Investors in People found that even in team environments, people “want to feel valued for [their] individual contribution to the team’s success. ... Recognition at work should focus on how employees as individuals contribute to the success of the organization, highlighting their choices and strengths and how these make a difference” (Investors In People, 2019). Leaders boost individual morale through recognition, thus contributing to the organization’s overall success.

## The Workplace

I firmly believe “recognition is free.” Written awards, such as a Certificate of Achievement, cost nothing but a bit of time, and I advocate for at least one to be written each month for a deserving Soldier.

There are always Soldiers who made notable progress: They may have started college, completed their first semester with a GPA above 3.0, improved their physical fitness, or consistently performed to the organization’s standards.

They deserve recognition, and it doesn’t always have to be work performance. Even a simple note of appreciation can be impactful, demonstrating you recognize their dedication and value them enough to invest your time in expressing genuine gratitude.

I recall standing in formation for a promotion ceremony where everyone could give a speech — except for a young private. Having been in the Army for less than a year, he was overlooked, as if his shorter time in service made him less deserving of sharing his thoughts. However, a promotion to private first class is as worthy

of recognition as a promotion to specialist. Though the responsibilities differ, both ranks contribute meaningfully to the organization and the mission.

Leaders must recognize that every Soldier, regardless of their role, plays a vital part in the mission’s success. As Gallup notes:

*“Beyond communicating appreciation and providing motivation to the recognized employee, the act of recognition also sends messages to other employees about what success looks like. In this way, recognition is both a tool for personal reward and an opportunity to reinforce the desired culture of the organization to other employees.”*

(Gallup, 2024)

Every recognition must be sincere and well-deserved. Leaders should know that the power of recognition ties in with retaining top talent and motivating Soldiers. When NCOs foster an environment that respects and values their Soldiers’ contributions, it can create a ripple effect, encouraging Soldiers to recognize and appreciate their peers. Leaders must identify and implement strategies that best suit their Soldiers to cultivate this positive culture.



Sgt. Ashley Rogers places Pfc. Angelica Bautista's patrol cap during her promotion to private first class. A promotion to private first class is as worthy of recognition as a promotion to specialist. Though the responsibilities differ, both ranks contribute meaningfully to the organization and the mission. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Katherine Alegado)

## Retention

Employees who feel valued and appreciated are more likely to stay with the organization, reducing

turnover rates. A 2023 study noted, “Recognizing employees’ contributions and creating a culture of appreciation fosters loyalty and a sense of belonging, increasing employee commitment and dedication to the organization” (Ramya & Vanithamani, 2023).

Money isn’t the sole factor influencing retention, especially for Generation Z. For many in this generation, feeling valued in the workplace and having meaningful purpose is just as important (if not more so) than financial compensation.

In conversations with Soldiers, I found that compensation often isn’t the only reason they decide to leave the service or continue serving. Instead, it’s the lack of appreciation.

It’s common for Soldiers to go a year or two without



recognition, and I know Soldiers who have given their all at work but didn't receive a permanent change of station (PCS) award. There's a prevailing belief that the hardest workers often receive nothing in return except more work.

As Gallup notes, "Rewarding employees who are not top performers could adversely affect high performers' motivation" (Gallup, 2024). These factors play a significant role in retaining Soldiers, because the conversation extends far beyond the motor pool, offices, or Charge of Quarters (CQ) desk. It reaches social media, friends, family, and potential recruits.

The experiences of active Soldiers profoundly influence the perceptions of those considering joining the military service, shaping their decisions based on the stories they hear from those currently serving.

While meeting the standard is undoubtedly a part of the Army profession, the balance between discipline and recognition is crucial — something the NCO Creed emphasizes.

Performance counseling should acknowledge and commend a Soldier's efforts to maintain the Army standard and excel in their duties. By fostering an environment that values every team member's contributions, we create a culture where Soldiers look

forward to coming to first formation with enthusiasm rather than dread. This positive atmosphere not only boosts morale but can also increase retention, encouraging more Soldiers to continue serving.

## The Lasting Impact

Leaders have a profound and lasting impact on Soldiers. How leaders value and recognize Soldiers may contribute to their performance and the organization's culture.

This sense of purpose and belonging drives excellence, strengthens bonds within the unit, and extends beyond the current formation. Soldiers will emulate the treatment they experience and will carry those lessons with them to their next unit, a natural human tendency.

By fostering a positive and respectful environment, leaders influence their immediate team and contribute to a lasting culture of excellence across the force.

I've observed how Soldiers often adopt traits from their direct NCOs, including communication and leadership styles. Leaders' interactions are constantly watched and emulated by those they lead.

When leaders consistently recognize and applaud Soldiers' contributions, those behaviors will likely be imitated. Leaders create a ripple effect,



Compensation often isn't the only reason Soldiers decide to leave the service or continue serving. Instead, it's the lack of appreciation. Active Soldier experiences profoundly influence the perceptions of those considering joining the military service, shaping their decisions based on the stories they hear from those currently serving. (U.S. Army photo by David Poe)



Leaders have a profound and lasting impact on Soldiers. When they consistently recognize and applaud Soldiers' contributions, those behaviors will likely be imitated. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Isabel Wagner)

promoting a culture of respect and recognition — driving meaningful organizational change.

Manager effectiveness impacts organizational health and influences all areas of an employee's experience, including engagement, growth and development, and productivity.

People will never forget the treatment they receive. Those experiences can stay with them for years, shaping how they treat others. This lasting impact underscores the importance of fostering a positive and respectful environment, as it can influence behaviors and leadership styles for years.

## Conclusion

The legacy left by leaders is defined by how they value, respect, include, and recognize those they lead.

By fostering an environment built on these principles, they create a culture that drives performance and boosts morale and retention. Soldiers are more than just contributors to the mission — they are the heart of the organization.

When leaders consistently recognize and appreciate their Soldiers' efforts, it reinforces the core values that sustain the force. Leading this way emphasizes the "People First" philosophy by demonstrating that people are the priority in the Army profession.

Adhering to this philosophy will give NCOs and other leaders the power to inspire a new generation of Soldiers to carry these lessons forward, ensuring our profession's continued success and strengthening the force for years to come. ■

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