



Leaders at all levels should live by the standard every day. Making on-the-spot corrections doesn't require hazing or bullying. They should be done with dignity and respect, setting the example and mentoring others to achieve the standard. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

Standards and Discipline

Making On-the-Spot Corrections

By Command Sgt. Maj. Jerry L. Dodson Jr.

Maneuver Center of Excellence and Fort Benning

A few months after assuming my role as the command sergeant major for the Maneuver Center of Excellence at Fort Benning, Georgia, we instituted a newcomer's physical training (PT) session as part of our *Keys to Connection* program. This arrangement allows me to conduct a PT session every two weeks with every newly arrived Soldier, NCO, and officer.

During the session, I saw Soldiers whose grooming standards violated regulations. I waited to see if other Soldiers would intervene and make the corrections. As you may have guessed, that didn't happen. Throughout the session, I pulled Soldiers aside

and found they'd just come off leave and didn't bother shaving or getting a haircut before joining their new unit.

At the end of each session, I welcome everyone to Fort Benning. Before releasing them, I ask who feels standards and discipline have eroded in the Army over the past five or 10 years. All NCOs and officers raise their hands unanimously. Many of you may agree with that assessment, and we all share a responsibility to do something about it.

The above scenario is just one of many I experience daily. Whether it's the Soldier who's walking and talking on a cellphone, wearing earbuds while in Operational Camouflage Patterns (OCPs) and walking to the Post

Exchange (PX), or grooming standards violations, NCOs and Soldiers aren't making on-the-spot corrections.

I struggled with the reason behind this reluctance to correct one another. After all, holding each other accountable is every Soldier's responsibility.

To identify the cause of this issue and resolve it, I held separate sensing sessions with groups of junior enlisted and junior and senior NCOs. I approached each session as a discussion, and all were similar.

In the first 30 minutes, I received responses like, "If they aren't my Soldiers, I don't feel comfortable correcting them," and "I don't want an IG, EO, or SHARP complaint and to be investigated." However, as each group settled in and opened up, an underlying issue emerged: Making these corrections could lead to uncomfortable confrontations.

Many Soldiers and junior NCOs lack the social or conversational skills to address these issues. The COVID-19 pandemic or a generational and societal norm may be behind this failing. Either way, it doesn't mean they're poor Soldiers or junior leaders. It just means we need to teach them how to handle these situations.

Making on-the-spot corrections should never be a

confrontation. It should be a conversation. Pulling a Soldier, NCO, or officer off to the side and speaking with dignity and respect will mitigate the possibility of confrontation or investigation. One of the hardest things we can do is correct a peer or superior. If they're professional, however, they will respect you for doing it.

While speaking to the junior enlisted Soldiers about standards and discipline, the question arose: *Why are these minor infractions so important?*

One textbook response to this question is that standards and discipline are the bedrock of military operations. They are vital for maintaining order and unit cohesion, ensuring readiness, and achieving mission success. Standards provide a framework for behavior, performance, and procedures, while discipline ensures adherence to these standards.

My viewpoint is more elementary. How can I trust you in a combat zone if I can't trust you to make on-the-spot corrections and enforce standards and discipline in a garrison environment?

A few still struggle with the concept, because they don't view these minor standard violations as serious

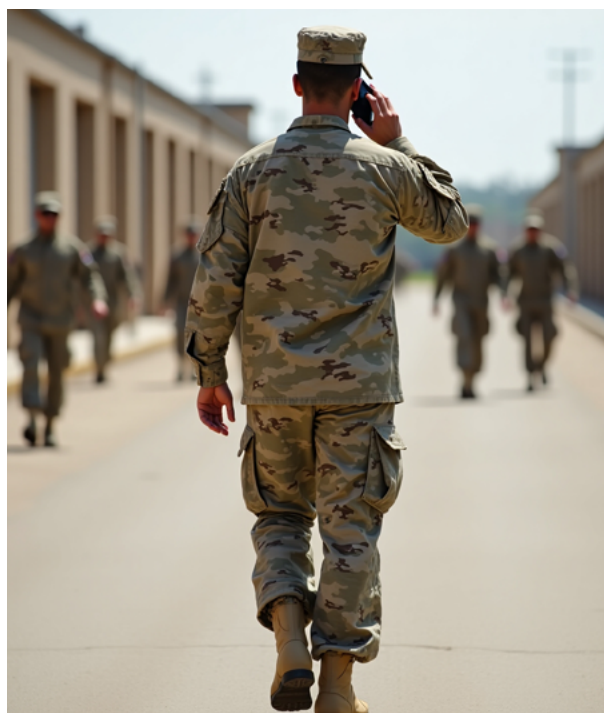


Making on-the-spot corrections should never be a confrontation. It should be a conversation. Pulling a Soldier, NCO, or officer off to the side and speaking with dignity and respect will mitigate the possibility of confrontation or investigation. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Pfc. Israel Fernandez)



ABOVE: Leaders at all levels must set the example and mentor others to achieve the standard. Holding each other accountable with dignity and respect is every Soldier's responsibility. (U.S. Army photo by 1st Sgt. Luisito Brooks)

AT RIGHT: Whether it's the Soldier who's walking and talking on a cellphone, wearing earbuds while in Operational Camouflage Patterns (OCPs) and walking to the Post Exchange (PX), or grooming standards violations, NCOs and Soldiers aren't making on-the-spot corrections. (AI image generated by *NCO Journal* staff)



enough to address. So, I took another approach, tying it to sports. (Afterward, more junior Soldiers seemed to relate to the concept.)

I asked them to name a team that has won a Super Bowl, World Series, or World Cup that didn't have high standards or hold each other accountable while on the field. None could give me an example. This allowed me to articulate the importance of standards and holding each other accountable, regardless of whether you're in the Army or on a professional sports team.

Mike "Coach K" Krzyzewski spoke at a recent Maneuver Warfighter Conference. He played basketball at West Point, then went on to be the head coach at Duke University — where he led his team to more national titles and Final Four appearances than any other coach in men's basketball. Additionally, he was selected to serve as the head coach for the U.S. Olympic team, which won gold medals in three consecutive appearances.

Krzyzewski was essentially a squad leader for nearly 40 years while coaching basketball. During the Maneuver Warfighter Conference, he spent his hour discussing the importance of standards and discipline.

He explained that if you have low standards, it's easy

to meet them every day — but you will only be mediocre, at best. But if your standard is to be the best, then it is a team effort: Everyone must hold each other accountable, and that produces a winning team.

No one joins the Army to be on a losing team. All Soldiers want to be a part of a great organization. Much like successful sports teams, if our squads, platoons, and companies are disciplined and hold each other accountable, success will follow.

As NCOs, we are empowered by the officers above us. Being empowered comes with trust. That trust becomes fractured when we fail to do our jobs, like enforcing standards and discipline in our formations.

This issue is not isolated. This is an Army problem that will take every NCO to resolve.

I don't think there is a single answer, because every unit and installation differs. But at Fort Benning, we now have morning in-ranks inspections at the NCO Academy (NCOA) and all the Infantry and Armor basic courses. These events demonstrate what right looks like and allow students to make corrections among their peers with dignity and respect. The Sergeant Major of the Army has charged us all to be "brilliant at the basics." These inspections are just one example of getting after that.

Last fall, the Army released an Army Blue Book to reinforce standards and discipline across the force (Stadel, 2024). The release shouldn't surprise any Soldier or leader. The Chief of Staff of the Army released his top priorities in August 2023, and strengthening the profession is their foundation. This priority encompasses standards and discipline and underpins everything the

Army does daily (Sheely, 2023).

I was first introduced to blue books in the mid-'90s and have advocated for them since. They are excellent references for subordinate leaders, allowing newcomers to quickly learn a unit or installation's standards. However, a blue book is only valuable if it is adhered to and enforced by NCOs.

Regardless of how you define standards and discipline, we can all agree they are the foundation of everything

we do in the Army. Whether correcting a uniform violation or upholding an organizational blue book, standards and discipline are equally important and will only degrade an organization if not executed.

To address this problem, we need leaders at all levels to live by the standard every day. As NCOs, we must address this issue within our formations and organizations at all levels.

When doing so, we must reiterate that making on-the-spot corrections doesn't require hazing or bullying. They should be done with dignity and respect, setting the example and mentoring others to achieve the standard.

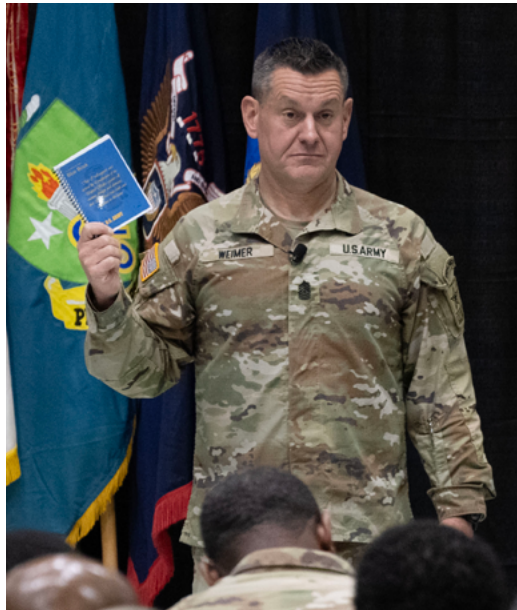
To close, I challenge us to reflect on a series of questions. If you are honest with yourself, you will agree we can all do better.

When was the last time you saw a Soldier, peer, or superior doing something wrong — or had a uniform violation — and didn't correct the deficiency?

When was the last time you made a correction? When doing so, did you do it with dignity and respect?

How can the Army address this issue and make Soldiers at all levels comfortable with making on-the-spot corrections?

What have you personally done to fix this problem? ■



Last fall, the Army released an Army Blue Book to reinforce standards and discipline across the force. Blue books are excellent references for subordinate leaders, allowing newcomers to quickly learn a unit or installation's standards. However, a blue book is only valuable if it is adhered to and enforced by NCOs. (U.S. Army photo by Robert Timons)

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Command Sgt. Maj. Jerry L. Dodson Jr., command sergeant major of the Maneuver Center of Excellence and Fort Benning, Georgia, enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1995. He has served in a variety of positions throughout his 30-year career, including as a rifleman, team leader, section leader and platoon sergeant, senior ROTC military instructor, first sergeant, battalion operations sergeant major, and command sergeant major. He deployed five times to Afghanistan and four times to Iraq. Dodson earned an associate degree in general studies from Marshall University, and a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Management (Organizational Leadership) from Excelsior College.



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