



Discipline should be assessed in the individual, team, and organization. As individuals, we must hold ourselves accountable to our values, creeds, and ethos. We must build self-policing, cohesive teams that accept nothing less than the standard in every endeavor. (U.S. Army photo by Army Staff Sgt. Andrew Smith)

# Discipline Saves More Lives Than Marksmanship

*By Command Sgt. Maj. James L. Light*

1st Armored Division

## Introduction

**CONTACT FRONT! 50 METERS!**

**A**s hot steel flew in all directions, elements of 2nd Platoon, Bravo Troop, 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry Regiment, determined they made chance contact with a Taliban force of equal size. It was the winter of 2010 in Eastern Afghanistan's Kunar River valley, a highly kinetic, or active, area at the time.

And the Taliban had the high ground.

The patrol leader was a young cavalry scout staff sergeant. He rapidly assessed the situation as his squad gained fire superiority and gave the only order he could: "Break contact!"

The squad leader and two team leaders did exactly as they were trained and executed a "to standard" break contact battle drill and safely returned to Combat

Outpost Pirtle-King. As soon as they returned, the squad members realized they had a problem.

The courageous staff sergeant reported immediately to the first sergeant at the troop command post — me. He simply said, "First sergeant, we have an issue."

"Were there casualties?" I asked.

"No."

He then explained he lost his map while maneuvering his squad. As he delivered the news, I noticed his left cargo pocket wasn't secured. Pointing to the pocket, I asked if that's where he'd carried the map.

"Yes."

He had made a grave error and failed to do a simple task ingrained since basic combat training: Keep pockets secured at all times. It was a lapse in individual discipline.

Discipline should be assessed at the individual, team, and organizational level. As individuals, we must hold ourselves accountable to our values, creeds, and

ethos. We must build self-policing, cohesive teams that accept nothing less than the standard in every endeavor.

Organizations must understand commanders' guidance, training priorities, and their role in accomplishing the Army's mission through a disciplined approach. It's the sum of these three that helps determine our personal success in the Army, of our teams in training, and of our formations in battle.

Discipline is an essential element of a leader's character and the cornerstone of the Army profession. It's so essential that it's referenced 44 times in FM 6-22: Developing Leaders. Paragraph 1-21 describes the role and responsibility of the NCO corps in establishing and maintaining discipline:

“1-21. NCOs are responsible for setting and maintaining high-quality standards and discipline while conducting daily missions making decisions based on disciplined initiative derived from commanders' intent. NCOs serve as standard-bearers and role models vital to training, educating, and developing subordinates. Through training, coaching, mentoring, counseling, and informal interaction, NCOs guide Soldier development every day and play a role in developing junior officers. NCOs advise officers at all levels and are an important source of knowledge, experience, and discipline for all enlisted matters.” (Department of the Army [DA], 2022)

NCOs train, teach, and mentor all Soldiers in every formation. Therefore, their example is paramount. Discipline as a character attribute is described in paragraph 4-21:

“4-21. Discipline is a mindset for a unit or an organization to practice sustained, systematic actions to reach and promote a capability to perform its military function. Often this involves attending

to organization and administration details, which are less urgent than an organization's key tasks, but necessary for efficiency and long-term effectiveness. Making the right choices involves discipline. Discipline is a reinforcing function to character. Self-discipline is everyone's responsibility, while leaders also are responsible for unit discipline. Development relies on self-discipline to put others' needs ahead of personal comfort and desires. The attribute discipline has a single component: Control personal behavior.” (DA, 2022)

You can assess discipline by using table 4-11 (DA, 2022): Control personal behavior. Using this manual can help us improve ourselves, the team, and our organization.

| <b>Strength Indicators</b>   |   | <b>Need Indicators</b>   |  |
|--|---|--|--|
| Able to make hard choices, especially putting the good of the organization ahead of themselves.<br>Maintains physical fitness.<br>Demonstrates punctuality and reliability.<br>Applies disciplined initiative in absence of orders.<br>Maintains standards for self and subordinates.<br>Displays proper time management.<br>Encourages positive behaviors and disciplines negative behaviors.<br>Follows orderly practices in administrative, organizational, training, and operational duties. |   | Consistently takes the easy way even if better ways exist.<br>Unreliable.<br>Lacks physical fitness.<br>Displays non-professional behavior.<br>Tolerates others' inappropriate behavior.<br>Inconsistently applies standard operating procedures.<br>Views training as just another task to complete.<br>Disorganized. |  |
| <b>Underlying Causes</b>   |   |  |  |
| Failure to internalize Army Values and traditions.<br>Lapses into complacency.<br>Lacks the desire for excellence.<br>Focuses on self-interest.<br>Manages anger poorly.<br>Lacks self-awareness and the ability to self-manage.<br>Does not understand how favoritism undermines authority.<br>Does not understand how to effectively communicate and enforce standards.  |   |  |  |
| <b>Feedback</b>  | Reflect on instances where you wished you had acted differently with respect to Army Values. Identify the attitudes or triggers that may have contributed to the situation. |  |  |
|  | Consider your actions in a recent assignment. Do you maintain self-discipline? Do you make the right choices rather than the easy choices? Are you reliable and punctual?   |  |  |
|  | Compare how you manage time to others. Do you get as much done as they do or more? Are you prioritizing and getting the most important tasks done on time?                  |  |  |
| <b>Study</b>   | Study the factors that prevent having good self-discipline (such as defense mechanisms, ego, restraint, or delayed gratification).  |  |  |
|  | Watch a role model demonstrate discipline. Ask how discipline is important to them, what are the pitfalls of slipping standards, how they maintain self-discipline.         |  |  |
|  | Review the "Discipline" exercise on the CAPL website and consider the facilitator questions. Think how you might incorporate what you learn into your life.                 |  |  |
|  | Review the Inconvenient Discipline video exercise on the CAPL website and consider the facilitator questions.   |  |  |
|  | Access the Central Army Registry to complete L20 IMI—The Value of Self-Awareness and L21 IMI—Seeking and Delivering Face-to-Face Feedback.                                  |  |  |
| <b>Practice</b>  | Study time management techniques. Implement methods to use time more efficiently.   |  |  |
|  | Review the counterproductive leadership modules on the CAPL website to identify, assess, and address counterproductive behaviors.   |  |  |
|  | Think how you might incorporate the principles from the study activities. Practice taking various actions to act on those principles and creating good habits.              |  |  |
|  | Deliberately choose to adhere to the Army Values and other expected behavior.   |  |  |
| Take notes from the feedback and study steps about ways to improve controlling your behavior. Incorporate different actions to improve your routines.  |   |  |  |
| As you perform your duties, consider how others would view your discipline if they were aware of your thoughts or actions.   |   |  |  |

Table 4-11. According to Field Manual 6-22, Developing Leaders, discipline at the individual level is primarily self-discipline, the ability to control personal behavior. Discipline expresses what the Army Values require — willingly doing what is right.

## The Individual

Self-discipline is each Soldier's ability to hold themselves accountable to basic standards. Every standard in the Army profession has a purpose that improves lethality and survivability.

NCOs must ensure they understand and communicate that purpose during training and garrison activity to build good habits they will use during wartime. Each Soldier must also adhere to the elements of Army character to build trust between team members and guarantee ethical conduct in battle.

Discipline is more easily maintained when purpose is effectively communicated, creating shared understanding and promoting ownership at the individual level.

Soldiers need to know why they do what they do every day. For example, barracks, uniform, and equipment inspections teach them how to live clean, look professional, and account for their equipment (which drives down needless damage or loss of personnel, supply, and equipment).

Physical training is conducted to ensure they're ready, physically and mentally, to accomplish wartime tasks. When you're crawling into a trench with the enemy, that's the wrong time to wish you'd spent more time in the gym!



Soldiers prepare to move from cover during an attack by anti-Afghan forces in Kunar province, Afghanistan, March 13, 2010. All Soldiers look to sergeants to show them the way, and they must maintain and display self-discipline in all they do. The example they set as NCOs through their appearance and how they carry themselves is how others most readily learn what right looks like. (U.S. Army photo by Master Sgt. Gary Witte)

Maintenance is done regularly to keep equipment ready to fight when called upon. Remember, we will fight with what's in our motor pool! Once Soldiers know why, it becomes easier to foster commitment, and committed Soldiers will want to do what's right and put

forth maximum effort (even when leaders are not there to supervise).

For commitment to be long lived, Soldiers must be grounded in all character attributes. Train character as often as possible to help them develop the personal and professional strengths that enable their long-term success.

The Army must be their chief influencer. The stronger their character attributes, the more likely they continue to make the right decisions — decisions that look like personal accountability ... which means discipline.

Soldiers look to sergeants to show them the way, so sergeants must maintain and display self-discipline in all they do. The example they set as NCOs through their appearance and how they carry themselves is how others most readily learn what right looks like. Someone is always looking. The more stripes and rockers you have, the more they look — and the greater the impact of your presence.

Living the NCO creed, as best as they can, is how NCOs ensure they set the best example possible. It's something they must become, not just something they recite. Through years of repetition and reflection, it must be the lens through which they view all things ... including themselves.

NCOs must put in the daily work to grow closer to the profession and hold peers accountable to the same standards. Character drift is real, and staying grounded in the requirements of service to the formation is paramount.

It's never about the name tag. You must be committed to what's on the left side of your chest, not the right (U.S. Army, not your last name). Your personal example will be what your team emulates, good or bad.

## The Team

Back to the story, the squad's action that night was exceptional. Although there was a problem to solve, the team's actions were not reflective of the leader's lack of discipline. Their stealthy movement allowed them to surprise the enemy rather than walk into an ambush.

Their textbook execution of the react to contact battle drill allowed them to quickly gain fire superiority and generate options. Great communication and fire distribution allowed them to break contact and withdraw



A disciplined unit will not accept anything less than every Soldier meeting the standard during training and will continue to train until it is met. Good units will not prioritize completing tasks over quality repetitions. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Sgt. Jon Cortez)

without casualties. It was the discipline in training, execution of battle drills, and trust in one another that won the day.

Team cohesion is protected first and foremost by the team members themselves. What every team leader should work to build is an environment where everyone is invested in the success of the individuals around them and the team as a whole.

Peer leadership and peer accountability will close gaps exposed by team members' waning discipline and assist those struggling to achieve a standard. Individuals don't win championships in team sports, and the same holds true for war.

The leader's actions shape the team daily, regardless of rank and echelon. Consistent attitude and effort shape those of your subordinates. Good standard operating procedures (SOPs) and consistent standards enforcement create clear expectations and ease friction when integrating new team members. Predictability day to day reduces stress on formations and improves trust, performance, and morale.

Finally, leaders should ensure the team's culture is in line with the larger team of teams. Misaligned subcultures can quickly take shape and be destructive to the Soldiers within and the greater mission. Be proud of your team, your patch, and the Army!

The crucible of combat can be destructive to cohesion built during training. Veterans of the last war will speak of complacency regularly occurring during transition periods or prolonged risk exposure. Over time and with continued exposure, discipline erodes

if not minded daily. The standards and habits built in garrison matter most in this case.

I've seen more Soldiers killed or wounded in battle and training from failing to enforce or follow a standard than from enemy fire. It's been proven time and again that the enemy is not better than us ... it's the erosion of discipline that creates opportunities for our enemies to succeed. We can overcome this effect through consistent focus on our routine business.

Never feel sorry for yourself and remember what you're training for. The secured cargo pocket matters on month nine just like it did on day one.

## The Organization

We both knew the lost map was sensitive. It had critical graphics and target reference points for the entire valley. If the enemy found it, we'd all be in danger. I had no choice but to order the squad back up the mountain to recover it.

"Go get it," I told them.

We both knew the risks associated with the decision, but as a troop, we execute without question. The squad went back out and recovered the map without incident and, no doubt, saved lives by doing so.

I've heard countless leaders describe disciplined organizations as those that do routine things routinely. I don't know who first said this, but it's true and worth further discussion to understand what that means in practice.

It starts with shaping your formation's environment to enable its success. You do this by communicating

expectations and priorities and then aligning organizational resources and activities with those expectations and priorities. These are key to building trust with Soldiers and creating predictability in the lives of those you lead.

Effective training management systems that produce accurate and detailed company training schedules are the best example of how we synchronize resources and provide predictability for Soldiers. Details and accuracy help the NCO corps implement the eight-step training model for upcoming training and schedule routine business around that training.

Routine training meetings are the company-level leader's tool to synchronize resources and hold platoons accountable for getting routine things done right. These training schedules become the most important factor in creating a predictable environment, unlocking the power of the NCO corps, and enabling organizational discipline.

All larger organization leaders are responsible for ensuring readiness guidance is communicated, planned, and resourced to create good company-level training.

Simultaneously, battalion and brigade command teams and staff should guard jealously against distractions that interfere with priorities. Companies should prioritize achieving the standard while training and maintaining, and they should exercise discipline to avoid sacrificing that standard for time.

We must all remain focused on mastering the fundamentals and resist any additional tasks that disrupt our disciplined approach to warfighting readiness. Every hour of training and every minute of every meeting should drive the organization toward that end.

A disciplined unit will not accept anything less than every Soldier meeting the standard during training and will continue to train until it is met. Good units will not prioritize completing tasks over quality repetitions.

Disciplined units will minimize unofficial means of communication that disrupt training schedules and will

fight for predictability. NCOs, particularly command sergeants major, first sergeants, and platoon sergeants, guard the standard and protect the environment they strive to create.



Effective training management systems that produce accurate and detailed company training schedules are the best example of how we synchronize resources and provide predictability for our Soldiers. (U.S. Army Photo by Pf. Savannah Olvera)

## Conclusion

Discipline should be assessed in the individual, team, and organization. As individuals, we must hold ourselves accountable to our values, creeds, and ethos. We must build self-policing, cohesive teams that accept nothing less than the standard in every endeavor.

Organizations must understand commanders' guidance, training priorities, and their role in accomplishing the Army's mission through a disciplined approach. It is the sum of these three that helps determine personal success in the Army, of teams in training, and of formations in battle.

NCOs are not just encouraged or asked to set a good example, uphold the standard, and maintain discipline. They are responsible for it! It's stated time and again in training and leadership doctrine, the NCO Guide, and Army Command Policy. It's what Soldiers deserve, what officers expect, and what the profession demands.

Together, we must shape the environment in our formations, regardless of size, to execute all tasks to a high standard — the standard required to win the first battle of the next war.

The B Troop squad survived that encounter with a superior force without casualties because they were trained to a high standard, trusted one another, and were disciplined in executing their individual and collective tasks — not because they were great marksmen (which they were).

They were successful because they understood the map's importance to the greater mission and to every Soldier's

life on that outpost and in that valley. Subsequently, we had the organizational discipline to recover it.

To this day, you won't find me with a pocket flap, strap, or zipper unsecured. If you do, I have a division coin with your name on it! Trust also that I will check you, and if you come up short, I'll share this story with you again while you push! ■

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## References

Department of the Army. (2022). FM 6-22: Developing Leaders.

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