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Leading Across Generations

By Master Sgt. Bladimiro Fernandez

Sergeants Major Course

How do you lead a generation that questions everything, seeks meaning in every mission, and thrives on dialogue rather than just direction?

This is not a theoretical question; it is the daily reality for NCOs across the U.S. Army. We stand at a pivotal crossroads, shaped by evolving generational expectations, rapid technological advancement, and our own enduring institutional values.

Modern evidence demonstrates that effective Army leadership requires more than simple discipline enforcement; it demands an intentional focus on cultivating shared purpose and organizational clarity among Soldiers (Deloitte, 2023).

To build the lethal, cohesive teams required for the future fight, NCOs must shift from a leadership model of compliance to one built on earned credibility, clear communication, and a shared sense of purpose.

Leadership Challenges Across Generations

The Army's leadership landscape evolves with each generation. Boomers and Generation X typically experienced hierarchical, directive environments, while today's Soldiers increasingly seek purpose and understanding behind their orders (Kwartawaty et al., 2024; Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Twenge, 2017).

Today's generation is not defined by defiance, but by digital nativity. Having grown up with instant access to information, they're conditioned to ask "why" because they know the answer is always just a few clicks away. For them, transparency isn't a perk; it's the operating standard. These questions don't undermine authority. Instead, they reflect a deep-seated desire to connect with the mission on a personal level.

During my career, I've observed these expectations firsthand. As a junior Soldier in the early 2000s, questioning orders was rare and compliance was the

undisputed norm. As a squad leader, I rarely explained the reasoning behind our training plans. However, upon advancing into senior NCO roles with Generation Z Soldiers, I discovered that explaining the intent and encouraging input during field exercises fostered a profoundly different level of engagement.

This openness turned routine briefings into opportunities for collaborative problem-solving and genuine buy-in. Shifting from a compliance-based mindset to one that fosters understanding helped me build more committed and cohesive teams, laying the foundation for a more effective leadership philosophy.



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Purpose and Action: Leadership that Resonates

This philosophy begins with purpose-driven leadership, the cornerstone of any resilient team. When Soldiers understand the significance of their roles, they demonstrate greater initiative and adaptability (McKinsey & Company, 2025; Sinek, 2009). Explaining how individual tasks fit into the broader mission boosts motivation and proactive engagement across the ranks.

As a first sergeant introducing new biometric equipment, I briefed the company on why the technology mattered for base security and our unit's reputation. This empowered Soldiers to take initiative and teach others.

Both doctrine and experience confirm that teams united by a clear purpose will always outperform those relying solely on hierarchy (Department of the Army, 2019a; Deloitte, 2023). However, purpose alone is not enough. Leaders must translate that purpose into daily, tangible actions.

Practical Strategies: Building Generational Bridges

To lead effectively, we must translate these core principles into action. The following are not isolated suggestions but integrated habits that build trust and strengthen teams across generational divides.

- **Communicate Intent and Encourage Dialogue:** Relate every order to the larger mission and welcome questions so Soldiers understand their impact. During a field exercise at the National Training

Center, I explained how each checkpoint contributed to the overall mission's success, which led to a palpable increase in team members' responsibility and unity (Department of the Army, 2019b).

- **Foster Feedback Loops:** Use after-action reviews and informal sessions to drive constant improvement. After training at a live-fire range where several weapon malfunctions slowed progress, I held a candid after-action review. My team's honest feedback led us to revise our pre-range checks and establish a buddy system for equipment maintenance, which ultimately improved both scores and morale (Lopez, 2025).

- **Recognize and Empower:** Acknowledge achievements promptly to empower Soldiers and validate their contributions. When a junior specialist devised a clever solution to a communications blackout by jury-rigging a power source, I immediately praised his initiative in front of the team. Celebrating this technical problem-solving inspired others to contribute their own ideas in future challenges (Deloitte, 2023).

- **Adapt Traditions with Relevance:** Update ceremonies and routines with team input to keep them meaningful. When planning a promotion ceremony, I incorporated stories from the promoted Soldier's peers. This small change made the event more personal and significantly increased the sense of buy-in and esprit de corps within the unit.

• **Admit Mistakes and Demonstrate Accountability:** Share your lessons learned openly. After making a poor call during a night navigation drill, I acknowledged my error during the debrief, explained my rationale, and discussed alternatives. Owning my mistakes encouraged my Soldiers to express their thoughts and made them more willing to identify issues before they became larger problems (Department of the Army, 2022).

Integrating these habits does more than improve metrics. It fundamentally changes the leadership dynamic by building the kind of trust that shifts a leader's authority from position to earned credibility.

Building Authority Through Credibility and Adaptation

Applying these leadership concepts reveals a significant shift in how authority is established and perceived. In today's Army, authority flows from credibility, adaptability, and humility, not from rank alone. Generation Z in particular values transparency and clear standards, as digital technology reshapes how they access information and communicate (Gazzaley & Rosen, 2016).

It is crucial to acknowledge that this leadership style is more demanding. It requires patience to explain the "why," humility to accept feedback, and the courage to be vulnerable. It is far easier to issue a direct order than to foster a dialogue. The return on this investment, however, is a team that is more resilient, innovative, and deeply committed.

Throughout my leadership journey, inviting input on operational plans consistently led to stronger outcomes. While deployed to Afghanistan, I gathered my team for a planning session. Their suggestions to adjust patrol times improved alertness and directly reduced mission delays.

Experiences like these prove that open feedback and shared leadership cultivate deep respect and disciplined initiative. This approach aligns perfectly with Army

doctrine, which states that leaders build trust when they "create a positive environment" and are "fair and inclusive" (Department of the Army, 2019a).

Overcoming Resistance and Leading Change

This approach can invite skepticism, often from seasoned leaders forged in a different era of the Army. A fellow NCO might pull you aside and ask if you are being "too soft" or "losing your edge." The best way to overcome this resistance is not with arguments, but with results.

When a unit transitions to a new digital platform and the leader models openness by soliciting feedback, the change is adopted more smoothly. When high-performing junior NCOs are empowered as change agents, resistance gives way to buy-in.

Ultimately, Soldiers will follow leaders who demonstrate competence, communicate clearly, and show genuine concern for their team's success. If resistance persists, leaders must follow up directly, reinforce professionalism, and use mentorship to help Soldiers adapt.



During a field exercise at the National Training Center, I explained how each checkpoint contributed to the overall mission's success, which led to a palpable increase in team members' responsibility and unity (Department of the Army, 2019b). (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Marissa Keith)

Conclusion

To build the lethal, cohesive teams required for the future fight, NCOs must shift from a leadership model of simple compliance to one built on earned credibility, clear communication, and a shared sense of purpose.

True leadership is not about simply enforcing rules. It is about igniting pride by fostering meaning and trust within the ranks. Now's the time for NCOs to rise to

the challenge: to listen deeply, communicate with intent, and guide Soldiers with empathy and resolve. By taking these actionable steps, we strengthen our teams, build resilient units, and uphold the tradition of service that defines the Army.

The next time you stand before your Soldiers, put one of these strategies into practice. Explain the intent behind an order, invite feedback, or recognize a Soldier's initiative. Even a small step can make a meaningful difference. Let us lead with purpose, so every generation of Soldiers finds pride and meaning in wearing the uniform. ■



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