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# Engaged Leaders: The Key to Strong and Successful Soldiers

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**H**aving served eight years in the Army, I've encountered many different leadership styles. Leaders have made both negative and positive impacts on my career, shaping me into the leader I am today. Through my experiences, I learned that leaders who choose to be engaged have significant impacts on those around them. Being an engaged leader means establishing priorities, communicating effectively, creating a positive environment, and building bonds of honesty and trust.

In 2017, when I was a young private new to my first unit outside of the training environment, I was hungry to learn and be an exceptional Soldier. At the time, I was blessed to have a phenomenal squad leader, Sgt. 1st Class David Diaz, who was then a staff sergeant. After

introducing himself, the first thing he asked me about was my short-term goals. I told him I wanted to be an NCO. I wanted to lead Soldiers and stand out from my peers. From that moment on, he never stopped inquiring about my goals, asking what I was doing to set myself apart from my peers. For the first six months, Staff Sgt. Diaz constantly encouraged me to enroll in college. I repeatedly refused. I told him I joined the Army because I didn't want to go to college. I thought I wasn't smart enough for college and I didn't enjoy school.

One morning, Staff Sgt. Diaz said if I wanted to be a leader and stand out from my peers, I needed to put myself in positions that were outside of my comfort zone. His words resonated with me. That afternoon, I enrolled in American Military University to obtain

my associate degree in general studies. I received my diploma two years later and immediately signed up to begin my bachelor's degree in psychology.

Staff Sgt. Diaz motivated me to constantly work hard for my next achievement and to be confident in my ambitions. He refused to let me settle for mediocre. He knew he would fail as a leader if he didn't prove he cared about my career. I knew he truly wanted to see me succeed. A leader communicates goals openly, providing their subordinates with a clear vision of what they want to achieve and how to achieve it. Leaders must communicate effectively, providing information that is pertinent to helping Soldiers achieve success throughout their career (ADP 6-22). As the Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer states, "I will communicate consistently with my Soldiers and never leave them uninformed." Being an engaged leader means showing your Soldiers, through proper communication and putting their needs above your own, that they are important, and their careers are a priority.

In January of 2019, I was on day six of a 10-day field exercise. It had been raining since we arrived on site. My boots and back-up boots were soaked. I was freezing down to my bones and could not stop my teeth from chattering. I was in full kit and pulling security on the detainee holding area (DHA). The longer the field exercise went on, the more I let the situation affect me negatively. However, my squad leader at the time, Sgt. 1st Class Dylan Tillman, who was then a staff sergeant, helped turn the situation around. He came over to check if I needed anything, and I'm sure he could feel the misery rolling off me. Staff Sgt. Tillman ignored my negative attitude, maintained his positive demeanor, and asked me why koala bears make great pets. His official answer was that "koala bears meet all the koalafications."

It didn't take long for his happiness to become infectious, and I was laughing so hard my stomach hurt. Staff Sgt. Tillman did not enjoy being in that cold

rain any more than I did, but he knew the training was important, and we needed it to be the most effective and prepared correction/detention specialists. After he was done with his jokes, he told me that the current situation wasn't going to last forever and to remember that a bad attitude can rub off on others. He reminded me to think about the knowledge and experience I was gaining, and that one day I would share it with my own Soldiers. His words changed my perspective on that field cycle for the better. Staff Sgt. Tillman demonstrated what it means to accomplish the mission and account for the welfare of his Soldiers.



I was in full kit and pulling security on the detainee holding area (DHA). The longer the field exercise went on, the more I let the situation affect me negatively. (U.S. Army photo by Kevin Sterling Payne)

Every situation in the Army won't always be ideal. However, an engaged leader is right there with their Soldiers the whole way, providing the positivity they might need to get through tough situations. Staff Sgt. Tillman engaged with me every day of that field cycle. By being there, he was subtly creating a positive and productive environment.

Leaders create a positive environment by building trust and cohesion, encouraging initiative, demonstrating empathy, promoting open communication, and enhancing esprit de corps. Communication between subordinates and leaders is essential to achieve and maintain a positive climate, as it provides subordinates with the opportunity to honestly discuss the conditions of their lives and the climate of the unit. Leaders maintain positive expectations and attitudes which support effective work behaviors



Communication between subordinates and leaders is essential to achieve and maintain a positive climate, as it provides subordinates with the opportunity to honestly discuss the conditions of their lives and the climate of the unit. (U.S. Army photo by Hannah Covington)

and healthy relationships, while accomplishing the mission. Leaders, when properly engaged, leave an organization better than it was when they arrived (ADP 6-22). “The leader’s Attitude is like a thermostat for the place she works. If her attitude is good, the atmosphere is pleasant, and the environment is easy to work in. But if her attitude is bad, the temperature is insufferable” (John C. Maxwell, “The 360 Degree Leader: Developing Your Influence from Anywhere in the Organization”).

Establishing an honest and trusting relationship with Soldiers is paramount to being an engaged leader. The year leading up to my promotion board in 2019, I was constantly studying and preparing myself. My team leader, Staff Sgt. Vincint Rowe, then a sergeant, hosted a mock board for our platoon. I was excited and ready to compete against my peers. The day of the mock board came around, and I was the third Soldier to compete. I was instructed to begin the board by first reciting the Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer, which I did flawlessly and proudly. However, I was not expecting to be asked to explain each paragraph of the creed afterward. I sat there in front of the board

members and could not seem to get any words to form in my brain. For the past year, I had been studying the Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer to recite it instead of understanding the meaning and value of the words. When I could not come up with anything, I was dismissed. I was embarrassed and did not want to face my team leader after that.

I sat outside, away from everyone, seething with disappointment. I saw Sgt. Rowe later that morning, after the mock board concluded, and he did not say a word for what seemed like an eternity. When he

finally spoke, he pulled out a piece of paper with a two-column chart that listed my strengths and weaknesses. He pointed out all the things I needed to work on and where I excelled. He did not harp on the mistake I made

during the mock board because he knew that was not the way to teach me. If he yelled and belittled me for my failure, I would end up shutting down. He would not be engaging with me in an effective manner.

Leaders create constructive learning environments by using methods of training that work for their Soldiers. In this environment, opportunities are provided for Soldiers to reach their full potential while stimulating innovative and critical thinking skills. There is an emphasis on the importance of learning from mistakes, which motivates Soldiers to develop themselves and seek new approaches to problems (ADP 6-22).

Sgt. Rowe included both praise and constructive criticism, helping me understand the importance of giving adequate feedback. Because Sgt. Rowe put in significant effort as a leader, he knew how I learned best. He had to use a different teaching style than he may have used for a different Soldier. He didn’t just throw a study guide at

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me and tell me to read it. He had trained and taught me long enough to know that praising me for my achievements and providing constructive criticism in areas where I fell short was the most effective way to communicate with me. Due to his honesty, I trusted him to lead and teach me the way I needed so that I was successful.

For the past 250 years, the United States Army has continuously worked to develop leaders who have been and will continue to be at the forefront of our nation's wars. Leaders must demonstrate they are establishing priorities, communicating effectively, creating a positive environment, and building a bond of honesty and trust. It shows subordinates, peers, and leaders alike that they have genuine interest and care for the people and organization they are leading. ■



The day of the mock board came around, and I was the third Soldier to compete. I was instructed to begin the board by first reciting the Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer, which I did flawlessly and proudly. (U.S. Army photo by 1st Lt. Michaela Parrish)

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