

Senior NCO's perspective on leadership, training

By SGM Frank C. Cota, Jr., ADA

Thoughts and philosophies on leadership are as varied as leaders themselves. Moreover, those who have written about the subject have much more experience than I; however, my passion and love of the art and study of leadership is every bit as strong.

Units Armywide strive to maintain training and equipment readiness rates in accordance with Army standards. This desire to achieve, and in most cases exceed, Army standards to “be the best” or just to “check the block” sometimes leads to poor judgment. Poor judgment can lead to poorly trained Soldiers and leaders or even injury or death.

This article discusses poor leader judgment in falsifying unit training reports and refers to a unit that may have been a victim of such tactics. It also addresses some fundamental mistakes that occur while preparing and training Soldiers to become leaders. Some of these issues occur routinely, yet senior leaders, especially NCOs, allow them to pass without taking action to stop them. This is not in keeping with the basic responsibilities of the NCO Corps, and the results can prove deadly.

The capture and deaths of Soldiers from the 507th Maintenance Company in March of 2003 is a sad and terrible tale that caused a media frenzy and certainly brought to light our Soldiers’ vulnerability and the harshness they face in combat. We know that this type of occurrence happens, but there are some issues that could have been avoided had this unit been trained — not “on paper” but in reality.

The 507th Soldiers met their fate due to the commander’s navigational error. Subsequently, only one other leader in the unit recognized that they had taken a wrong turn — a platoon sergeant. The rest followed aimlessly unaware where they were or where they were going. What did the unit training statistics say about this unit before combat? I would wager that they were a C-1 across the board (fully prepared to perform its combat mission).

I will not delve specifically into this case. I only point to the fact that the errors leading up to this tragic event and many of the issues — identified by the Army in the after-action report — point to a unit that was ill prepared to carry out its wartime mission. The tragic and most disconcerting questions here are who knew, why was the chain of command all the way to the top not informed, and why was a maintenance company that was organic to a Patriot battalion assigned to perform a mission in support of a maneuver unit that it had never worked with or supported in any capacity before?

Every leader “worth his salt” in the Army wants to be the best. Striving to be great is something that is ingrained in every Soldier from the first day that he enters the Army. Unit competitions and mottos are filled with the desire to be and look the best. But what happens when leaders cross

the line of good judgment by not training to be the best, but rather saying that they are the best. In other words, what happens when leaders at every level “fudge” their statistics on the quarterly training briefings to make themselves appear more “ready” than they really are?

Unit training reports. We all have sat in a quarterly training briefing and looked at endless statistics covering weapons qualifications, gunnery tables, physical readiness, nuclear, biological and chemical training ... on and on. It seems there is no end to the statistics that the Army maintains on unit readiness. Dull and boring as these meetings and issues are, they are important, not for the sake of competition or of being embarrassed for failing to be as good as the next unit, but because of what tale these statistics tell, and, more importantly, the decisions that are made by commanders at every level as a result.

Tremendous pressures are placed on company-level commanders to perform every required task and to do it before the quarter ends. As leaders, we know that when too much is scheduled, units do a lot of things poorly rather than a few things very well. So, why would a leader “fudge” statistics?

Some commanders may report false statistics because of pressures from higher headquarters, a desire to look better than other units, fear of a superior commander or fear of reporting poor results. Threats of a poor evaluation report may happen as well. This technique is horribly wrong and does a tremendous disservice to the leaders, units and, most importantly, the Soldiers who are the core of the unit.

What about the higher level commanders — do you think they are unaware a unit may not be as ready as it reports? I believe in many instances they are and choose to turn a blind eye for fear of “digging too deep;” it certainly has occurred in my experiences.

Appearances. Leaders at all levels want their units to be the best. To be the best, they need to train their units. However, if a gunnery streamer means more to you than your Soldiers’ lives, then buy a streamer and get out of the Army. If you as

a leader feel your unit deserves it, then earn it through training and preparation.

If the unit’s best efforts result in a Q-2, then that is what it has earned. The Soldiers know what to do to improve. Commanders at all levels, assess your unit statistics, and the Army will place you in the fight accordingly. If a leader lies about how good his unit is, then it may receive a mission that it is not ready for. A “paper champion” is no champion at all.

Lack of training time. Other issues arise when leaders place so much emphasis on a unit’s passing its respective training, that undue pressures are placed on evaluation teams to “give the unit the benefit of the doubt.” This also is dangerous.

Often the red-cycle tasks (details that occur during non-training time) or just plain poor planning will keep a unit from training as much and as thoroughly as it should, and an evaluation team is placed in a position to compromise its integrity because the unit commander has stated that all units “will get a go.”

Fear and intimidation. When commanders and leaders create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation to subordinate units for poor statistics, what they receive may be an inaccurate report of “paper physical training tests” and “check-the-block” weapons crew certifications. Ultimately, it will be the Soldiers who may pay the ultimate price for a unit’s desire or fear of reporting the truth of their respective unit’s true abilities.

I once had a senior leader tell me and other first sergeants during a meeting that “the old man doesn’t like the way the weapons qualifications look, so do what you have to do to get them to reflect what he is looking for.” I was absolutely floored. I told him and the rest of the leaders I was not where I wanted to be, but I had a plan to get there — maybe not within the time frame he wanted, but I had a plan none the less.

I also stated I would not be responsible for reporting my unit was at a level it was not. I do not ever want to be responsible for the death or injury of Soldiers because I said they were ready when they weren’t. I alluded to the tragedy of the 507th and how after “peeling back the onion” on the events that led to their deaths and capture, poor training was the underlying factor of their tragedy.

Accurate reporting. We have to get all leaders out of the mentality of wanting to “look good” and into the mentality of actually “being good.” My leadership philosophy summates what our obligation as leaders is regarding training and leadership. To

Florida Guardsmen from 3rd Battalion, 265th Air Defense Artillery Regiment, carry a shoulder mounted stinger missile launcher as they head to the firing lane at McGregor Range, N.M., April 21.

paraphrase, the “why” [of training] is to preserve our Soldiers and ensure that we properly train, lead and care for them. America has entrusted its sons and daughters to our care, and they deserve of nothing less than our most diligent efforts and best leadership.

We must not allow a leader at any level to say or report that the unit is more ready than it actually is. We have to take a stand and report our units as they are. It is a “come as you are” scenario, and we are obligated legally, morally and ethically to report our training status as it really is. If you are not ready, make a plan to get ready, but don’t lie.

Reporting a unit is not ready is just the first step. The most important step is training and maintaining it. In the end, what is reported to higher headquarters is not as important as what happens when we lie. Death, injury, capture and accidents are the end result of our failure to do the right thing.

Building leaders. Another area in which overzealous leaders can cause harm is in advising young NCOs. I have witnessed some poor preparation of our young NCOs. So much so, a large majority of these leaders ascended to the next level only to fail at various leadership positions due to inexperience. These flaws mostly were due to leaders not preparing these leaders adequately to hold these positions.

In today’s Army, leaders at all levels — particularly on the enlisted side of the house — speak to Soldiers about preparing to “get to the next level.” But what does “preparing” entail? Does it mean going to the respective NCO professional development course to ascend to the next level? Is it making sure that your records are “straight?” Does it mean that Soldiers should compete at Soldier and NCO of the quarter/month/year boards or become drill sergeants and recruiters to get recognized and have something on their records that distinguishes them from others?

Leaders often instruct Soldiers how to get to the next level without giving them the tools to perform at that level. Not all Army leaders fail to train and mentor their Soldiers, but often a Soldier is groomed to come up quickly without really being prepared to hold the next position adequately.

Often when leaders speak to subordinates about what they should do to be promoted, we speak of drill sergeant and recruiter duties. But do we really look at the overall competency and skill set of the Soldier we are sending? More importantly, have we looked at the Soldier’s records to see if he has fulfilled all the job requirements throughout the course of his career?

I have seen Soldiers — selected at various NCO and Soldier-of-the-year boards or inducted as Sergeant Audie Murphy or Morales club members — become winners and then work outside their military occupational specialty for inordinate periods of time because that gained favor with leadership at higher levels.

I am not disparaging those accomplishments because they are all praiseworthy and take great discipline and work to achieve. However, leaders need to teach these accomplishments are merely the “shine on the armor” and not the hardening of the armor itself. These things, ultimately, will get Soldiers promoted above their peers. But they must recognize they have to return to their career management fields when their time is done.

I have witnessed many “high speed” Soldiers go to drill sergeant school and subsequently become instructors or vice versa. These Soldiers stay “offline” working outside of their career management fields for far too long. A Soldier who goes to drill sergeant school as a sergeant and then becomes an instructor will stay offline for approximately four to six years. By the time both these tours are finished, the Soldier is probably a sergeant first class with only a minimal amount of experience in their military occupational specialty.

This Soldier will go on to be a platoon sergeant. But, with even the most diligent work ethic, can this senior leader lead a platoon, mentor a platoon leader and be an asset to the unit with so little understanding and experience? Sure, the Soldier ascended the ladder as he should in respect to the recommended periods, but what is he bringing to the table other than a quick ascension record?

He has won these boards and attended these schools because he was advised that doing so would quicken his promotion. But now that he wears the rank, what can he do with it? He was advised these accomplishments were necessary, that he needed to “check the block” with these deeds — and now, he lacks the fundamental skill sets his position requires.

Often Soldiers leave these positions (instructor, drill sergeant, etc.) only because they realized or were advised that they now need platoon sergeant time to get promoted to master sergeant. Soldiers who wish to move up the ranks quickly recognize the necessary assignment requirements and try to fulfill these positions because they know they must “check the block.” The means to ascend with accomplishments can only go so far. Even if they can “check the block” with accomplishments and positions, ultimately, they will serve in greater capacities and have to perform.

Unfortunately, I have seen many of these so called “high speed” Soldiers “crash and burn” as senior leaders because they didn’t know what was expected of them. I have seen platoon sergeants focus on key control and connexes instead of crew and combat drills because they only knew about the former and not the latter. Because their “formative years” of leader development were spent on the easily attainable and aesthetic nature of “spit and polish” instead of training Soldiers in their basic career management field tasks, they focus on what can be seen easily and not on developing skills they need to prepare for combat.

As a master gunner, I saw every battery and crew in my unit perform their wartime missions on numerous occasions. Many times, I saw a crew drill so poorly that, short of injury or death, it was a complete disaster. On several occasions, the reason was pure incompetence, but there were also times where a senior leader — a platoon sergeant or first sergeant — had been away from the “game” far too long and had lost the edge on what proper training and preparation was all about.

Can a senior NCO properly advise a platoon leader or commander on the numerous tasks required for combat, garrison or red-cycle tasking if he has never performed, prepared or participated in any of those events — or if it was so long ago that he forgot what he learned? Ascension in the ranks is more than just increasing your pay grade; it’s about increasing your knowledge and competence. “Checking the block” to move up really does a disservice to us and our Soldiers. Every leadership position an NCO fulfills must be done with the passion and conviction that he would give to his own children.

We must teach Soldiers that fulfilling these positions and achieving recognition on these boards is a wonderful thing, but we also must advise them that these accomplishments should not be the nucleus of their existence nor should they be laurels to rest on for the entirety of a career. Our Soldiers’ lives and our nation’s security depend on the senior leader’s ability to teach, coach and mentor Soldiers and junior leaders. Soldiers at the lowest level are

SFC Gregory Laldee (right), color guard NCO-in-charge, 108th Air Defense Artillery Brigade, stands next to his color guard team after being pinned with an Army achievement medal during the XVIII Airborne Corps award ceremony at Fort Bragg, N.C., May 29. (Photo by SPC Crystal Abbott, U.S. Army)

making quick decisions with dire consequences for a bad decision in today's asymmetric warfare, and we must work ever harder to give these Soldiers the necessary tools to succeed.

Leadership guidelines. NCOs are the standard bearers and standard enforcers of the Army, but basic leadership guidelines often are forgotten in the daily business of being a Soldier and leader. These guidelines can help mitigate poor judgment. These guidelines are based upon principles that helped me and my Soldiers enjoy great success, and I hope they help validate your current views on these issues or at least give a different perspective on them.

The basics are paramount to the success of any team, and no team can perform without having a solid grasp of those basics. The basic doctrine that governs how all troops, batteries and companies conduct business is the same. So, why aren't all units exceptional if the doctrine that guides them is the same? It is because, as an Army, leadership and our legacy are left in people and not on paper. Leaders make units great, not the doctrine. I have broken down these basics into the "who, what, where, when and why" of leadership. These guidelines and tenets are geared towards the senior NCO, but are applicable to leaders at all levels.

Who. The "who" is fairly simple; it applies to all of our Soldiers, Department of the Army civilians and family members. This is our Army family and team. These are the people we are dedicated to serve.

What. Lead by example; commitment to Soldiers and their families is paramount. If you, as a leader, are not committed and passionate about what you do, your Soldiers will know it and conduct themselves accordingly.

Have faith; trust Soldiers to do the right thing. We must foster an environment that is conducive to Soldiers taking initiative and growing. In today's asymmetric battlefield, Soldiers at all levels make quick decisions that will affect lives. Harness their abilities

and desires and help them to improve.

Keep a watchful eye; train and supervise Soldiers always. Ensure you are present throughout every facet of training, mission or task. Our presence reinforces the importance of any task. If it is important enough for our Soldiers to do, then it's important enough for us to be there. Our presence establishes parameters and keeps Soldiers on task or on track.

Mentor, teach and train Soldiers; take the time to show them what "right looks like." Don't assume our Soldiers know how to perform a task or mission. Or if you do assume, do not be disappointed if the results are not what you expected and then "blast" the Soldiers because things aren't as you wanted them.

Know when to step in; take the time to talk with your subordinates at every available opportunity. When supervising and inspecting training, use that time to help Soldiers understand what they are doing and why they are doing it. Soldiers will work harder to accomplish a task or mission if they understand why it's important. This also helps you gauge strengths and weaknesses within your unit and helps you decide where you must focus your efforts.

Evaluate subordinate leaders; ensure that they are training and caring for their Soldiers. A simple way of gauging the abilities, worthiness and character of a leader is to ask yourself this simple question, "Would I trust this leader to lead my own children?" If the answer is no, then work to improve this leader's abilities. If this leader does not improve, then take measures to remove the leader from his position and, ultimately, the Army if necessary. The defense of a nation is no place for apathy or complacency, especially with leadership.

Where. The "where" applies from the field of play to the field of battle. Leadership and its tenets are applicable in every environment. Apply them in the field, in garrison, in combat and in every other place that puts you in contact with Soldiers.





SGT Andrew Reinheimer, E Battery, 3rd Battalion, 4th Air Defense Artillery Regiment, attached to the Division Special Troops Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division, transports a “casualty” during the final training exercise of a three-day combat lifesaver course in Baghdad, Iraq, July 22. (Photo by SFC Ron Burke, U.S. Army)

I realize leaders work hard to attain their respective ranks or positions. In that regard, temper your decisions with patience and understanding when dealing with challenging situations or Soldiers. Just because we can treat a subordinate a certain way, does not necessarily mean we should.

First sergeants and sergeants major must be extraordinarily cautious when reprimanding subordinates. Remember, we are in very powerful positions and could do more harm than good if our words or actions are overly harsh. I am not suggesting we do not deal firmly with subordinates when they fail to meet standards or mission requirements; but we must proceed with the wisdom and patience our years of experience have bestowed upon us.

Lastly, leaders should strive always to have Soldiers give their loyalty to the person we are and not the rank we wear. Regulation mandates respect and loyalty be given to the rank; however, it is more of a challenge and an ultimate reward to have Soldiers respect the leader beneath the rank. Exude the youthful enthusiasm of a young corporal with the knowledge, wisdom and the temperament of a sergeant major.

These thoughts are neither prolific nor profound; however, these basics have continued to serve me well. Leadership, as with anything, is a continual learning and evolving process. According to John Maxwell, longtime leadership expert and author; CSM Philip Rowland, 94th Army Air and Missile Defense Command; and CSM Ricky Lovett, former CSM of the 3rd Battalion, 2nd Air Defense Artillery, 31st ADA Brigade — men I respect tremendously — it takes about 20 years to develop a sergeant major or good leader.

I realize this is just the opinion of a select few; however, it merits thought — leadership is an ongoing and long process. Leaders must strive to learn and grow. In this way, we continually are improving — not for ourselves, but for those we lead.

Lead your Soldiers, your sections and your unit with dedication, loyalty, integrity and honor. Your subordinates recognize these traits and respond in kind. Teach them to become leaders with whom you would be proud to serve — and not to just “check the block.”

Knowledge, like money, cannot be taken with us after we pass, so share it generously. We spend our lives learning through our experiences, and I feel that it is incumbent upon leaders at all levels to share their knowledge continually. The value of knowledge lies not in its acquisition, but rather in its application. ■

When. The “when” is now and always. It is important to apply the basics of leadership presently, ensuring an investment in our leadership future.

Why. The “why” is to preserve our Soldiers and ensure they are trained, led and cared for properly. America has entrusted its sons and daughters to our care, and they deserve nothing less than our most diligent efforts and best leadership. We, as leaders, must never forget the rank and positions we hold are bestowed upon us to serve our Soldiers and their interests and not vice versa. Never forget where you came from. If you keep this in mind, you are less likely to make arbitrary decisions and recommendations regarding the disposition of our Soldiers.

Guiding principles. Lead, train and care for Soldiers with the same care and compassion that you would with your own children. Do everything in your power to ensure they are prepared and trained properly so that they may fight, win and return.

Remember leaders and NCOs are the nucleus of our Army. We must remain strong and confident. Remaining competent and vigilant will keep the power of our NCO Corps firmly in our hands. Our passion and love for what we do should permeate our organization. Our integrity and honor must be paramount. We must be the standard-bearers and standard enforcers. It is crucial to treat Soldiers with dignity and respect.

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