

There Is No “ACP” in Team .. But There Should Be

Col. Andrew Morgado

It only took me three days to make him cry. James (a pseudonym) was the Reserve Officer Training Corps administrative technician. He had been a government employee for many years. I was not his first professor of military science; likely just the dumbest. I thought I was being polite, saying “please” and “thank you.” My politeness, however, could not mask the full extent of my ignorance. As a senior major, fresh from war and the staff college, who had known nothing else outside of motor pools, ranges, and physical training in tactical formations, I adopted a manner of communicating that I would characterize as “direct.” As the new sheriff in town, I launched into my take-charge plan and did my best to motivate James in the only way I knew how. James did everything right and everything I asked him to do, but my manner was so abrasive, it caused him to break down. He took the next two days off from work. What did I do wrong?

Well, I did just about everything wrong. My approach violated every conceivable attribute of sound leadership and what it means to care for people. I failed to display empathy, proper bearing, and interpersonal tact, which are all fundamental Army leadership attributes. By first apprising the surroundings and setting, also known as exhibiting some patience, I could have achieved my goals in an easier way and without losing the confidence of my team.

Army Civilian Professionals (ACPs) are members of the Army team with a unique set of skills and qualifications. My narrow perception of what constitutes “the team” and my role in leading the individuals within it was a serious deficiency. When James came back to work, and after I took stock of what the Army taught me by reintroducing myself to the bedrock attributes and competencies of Army leadership—character, presence, intellect, leads, develops, and achieves, I decided to watch, listen, and understand.¹

James ran a tight ship and had full command of cadet actions. He cultivated a network of administrative technicians across the brigade to solve problems before they became problems. He was a trusted member of the campus community that, with a few well-placed calls, got access to resources not readily available to other departments. James was the perfect employee that I would hire in a minute to be my tank commander, platoon sergeant, or first sergeant. James had no military experience, but he was undoubtedly a combat multiplier in every way. The key part I missed was that James was not a soldier and was not motivated as a soldier, but he served the team in an equally important capacity as its uniformed members. The most troubling result of this encounter was my later realization that many of us who wear the uniform of our United States Army have similar blind spots to the great capabilities resident in our ACPs. Though the process of discovering



Graduates of the AMSC Civilian Education System's Enterprise Leadership Course, 2006, Fort Leavenworth, KS (Photo by Allyson McNitt)

these blind spots may not be as dramatic as my initial *faux pas*, any ignorance and failure to fully integrate the civilian workforce is detrimental to success. Our lack of understanding inhibits our ability to draw on these skills to improve the organization, invest in our people, and ultimately, accomplish the mission.

ACPs are appointed to federal service, but do not serve in the military.² This is an often misunderstood but important distinction, particularly when there are several categories of civilian employment, guided by both Title V of the U.S. Code (Civil Service) and Title X (the Armed Forces). The blurred lines of the Civilian Expeditionary Force that deploys ACPs away from their traditional roles in the generating force to active conflict zones further complicate matters.³

Though the distinctions are important, they introduce several procedures and guidelines not too different from human resources and personnel action functions routinely performed for our soldiers. Counseling, leave, pay—check, check, and check—all familiar and repetitive actions performed by E-1s through O-10s. Between soldiers and ACPs, more unites us than divides us.

Despite the series of amorphous classifications and different administrative procedures, ACPs are part of the Army profession and provide two essential services to the force: technical expertise and continuity.⁴ Slightly different rules may guide

them, but they are assigned members of our team with very distinct roles and capabilities that contribute in a meaningful way. As a leader and senior staff officer in large, geographically dispersed organizations, to include service as a chief-of-staff in multiple general headquarters, institutional memory and stability are essential for organizational success. ACPs provide that knowledge and stability to hold units together in stark contrast to military career paths that force minimal tenure and constant changeover. ACPs are frequently the resident experts that mitigate the institutional thrash characteristic of repeated leadership turnover. As such valuable and constituent members of our Army team, ACPs are people who must be led, not entities who we simply manage.

Leadership is at the core of the Army profession. Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, defines it as the “most essential dynamic of combat power.”⁵ At the heart of leadership is the sacred bond between the leader and the led.⁶ Army doctrine emphasizes the need to build trust, create a positive environment, and develop others while getting results. It is all-encompassing and inherent in every sub-organization in our Army.

Unfortunately, leaders frequently cite some of the uniqueness of ACP employment (e.g., forty-hour weeks, appraisals, and unions, to name a few) as insurmountable obstacles preventing the full integration of ACPs onto our teams. Are we

so ready to cast off valuable expertise, experience, and devotion to duty because one of our team members can only work nine-to-five, five days per week?⁷ This myopic approach of fixing on the superficial limitations will sideline talent and, more importantly, degrade mission accomplishment. These divisions will also inhibit the formation of trust and team performance. Adjusting our approach based on whom we are leading is not a new concept. Though the standards are the same, do we not approach a new soldier fresh from advanced individual training a bit differently than a ten-year veteran? Do we not often adjust soldiers' work schedules when they must complete an Army

officer education system. ACPs receive formalized instruction not only within their assigned career fields, but across the broader fields of professional education and leadership. Army Regulation 350-1 cites, "Like their uniformed counterparts, civilian employees must be functionally proficient and technically competent skilled leaders who are fully capable, adaptable, and totally committed to supporting the Army's mission."⁹

The Civilian Education System lives up to this directive. The ACPs within our organizations provide a broad spectrum of talent and will likely have a depth of education, knowledge, and experience that exceeds most members of our com-

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Fitness Test in the middle of the day? Is it not a fact that our soldiers receive "training holidays" and "day of no scheduled activities" where ACPs must work and continue to drive unit functions in the absence of uniformed members? Adjusting schedules to maximize participation and collaboration are about leveraging the strengths of our collective team. These distinctions and special provisions are enablers not obstacles. Knowing how to integrate ACPs and soldiers from across generations and backgrounds is a timeless part of military leadership. Good leaders find ways to incorporate all the talent available to them.

This pool of talent has only continued to grow deeper and broader since the establishment of formalized education career paths in 1983. Gen. Dennis Reimer, as Army Chief of Staff, reflecting on this institutionalization remarked, "We cannot leave the development of civilian leaders to chance."⁸ Since this time, the ACP education system continues to evolve and rivals, if not surpasses, the officer and non-commissioned

mands. The rigor in selection, preparation, and education differs only in style and orientation from the uniformed members' experience. The ACP occupying a position on the Table of Distribution and Allowances received substantial preparation to perform those duties.

Spending some time learning the rules will go a long way in helping uniformed personnel lead our ACP teammates. It is not difficult. There are three main points a military leader must fully understand to properly start the leader-to-led relationship with our ACPs. These are the position description (PD), performance elements, and communication. Tying these together allows organizations to establish "a culture of high performance [that] focuses on employee engagement, development, and accountability."¹⁰ The PD and associated performance plan establish the parameters of the ACP's functions and translates how these functions apply to the specific needs of the organization. The Army assigns ACPs to organizations to perform a specific set of functions.

The PD informs us of these functions.¹¹ The performance elements and associated performance standards tell the employee what to do and defines the standard to which they will complete these tasks.¹² Bringing these two components together, and representing the essence of leadership, is communication.

Leaders engage their ACPs with “continuous communication” to reduce uncertainty, provide transparency, and increase confidence.¹³ Just as leaders should be aghast if our soldiers only spoke to their supervisor at initial and evaluation outbrief counseling, we should be similarly offended if our ACPs only spoke to their supervisor at the mid-review and appraisal time. Communication with soldiers and ACPs alike should be continuous.¹⁴

When counseling our ACPs, there is no need to look for another leadership checklist. The Army Leadership Requirements Model (ALRM) applies to everyone in the Army. As stated in ADP 6-22, “The model conveys expectations and establishes the capabilities needed of all Army leaders regardless of rank, grade, uniform, or attire.”¹⁵ When looking just beyond the artificial and shallow distinctions, it is clear to see that the care and leadership of ACPs differs only in method from that demanded of our uniformed personnel.

Slightly different rules govern military personnel from our civilian professionals. This is for a reason. As military members frequently

change units and jobs, deploy to austere and physically demanding environments, and focus on a broad range of topics, our relatively stationary civilian workforce provides experience and continuity to stabilize the organization. This is both a complementary and supplementary relationship that makes our Army stronger and more capable. Understanding this differentiation as a source of strength instead of a liability will allow us to achieve the great potential resident in this relationship.

When joining a team that includes ACPs, uniformed members should acknowledge what they are—human beings, well-educated, soundly prepared, experienced professionals, who took an oath, dedicated to serving the United States. This is the basis of any relationship on our Army teams. My ignorance of these essentials, brought on by lack of adequate preparation, led me to violate basic rules of leadership. Allow my mistake to be instructive on what “not to do.” Listening to our people, removing obstacles from their path, investing in their growth, encouraging team bonds, and holding our teammates accountable should always be at the forefront of a leader’s mind and approach.¹⁶ Regardless of the clothes we wear, the badges of rank on our uniform, or any other external feature of appearance, leaders bring people together. ■

Notes

1. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (Government Printing Office [GPO], November 2019), 1-15.

2. George A. Wiggs, “Is the US Army Adequately Preparing Army Civilians to Assume Leadership Roles Within the Army Civilian Corps Compared to Uniform Service?” (student paper, Defense Acquisition University, April 2020), 18.

3. John Lapham, “Exploring the Complexities of Army Civilians and the Army Profession” (Strategic Research Project, U.S. Army War College, March 2013), 20.

4. Wiggs, “Is the US Army Adequately Preparing Army Civilians to Assume Leadership Roles Within the Army Civilian Corps Compared to Uniform Service?”, 18.

5. Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations* (GPO, March 2025), 27.

6. Christopher H. Johnson, “Reflections on Leadership,” *Naval War College Review* 67, no. 1 (2014): 140.

7. Lapham, “Exploring the Complexities of Army Civilians and the Army Profession,” 47.

8. Susan C. Foster and Brenda Small, “Civilian Development: Where Do We Go from Here?” *Military Review* 78, no. 2 (March/April 1998): 95.

9. Wiggs, “Is the US Army Adequately Preparing Army Civilians to Assume Leadership Roles Within the Army Civilian Corps Compared to Uniform Service?”, 21.

10. U.S. Department of Defense, Department of Defense Performance Management and Appraisal Program Toolkit (Washington, DC: GPO, April 2016), 2, https://www.dcpas.osd.mil/sites/default/files/2021-04/DPMAP_Toolkit.pdf.

11. *Ibid.*, 6.

12. *Ibid.*, 9.

13. *Ibid.*, 12.

14. *Ibid.*, 14.

15. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1–15.

16. Johnson, “Reflections on Leadership,” 142.

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