Building a Foundation of Training Management and Discipline

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Leaders throughout the Army have recognized that some junior and mid-grade NCOs are not enforcing basic standards and discipline. This is because senior NCOs have failed to train and hold junior NCOs accountable. As senior NCOs, training junior NCOs and maintaining good order and discipline are our responsibility. We would not tolerate our unit having substandard marksmanship; we would schedule more ranges and time for marksmanship instruction. Therefore, we should dedicate time to train NCOs to make on-the-spot corrections.

George Washington said, "Discipline is the soul of an Army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak, and esteem to all."[1] Discipline must be trained, and NCOs must be taught to enforce standards. Morning parade, an event where NCOs inspect Soldiers (and their equipment) and lead physical training (PT), is the premier training ground for teaching NCOs to inspect and correct their Soldiers. In this regard, we can take a page from Gunnery Sergeant Tom Highway in the classic film *Heartbreak Ridge*. After taking over a ragtag crew of Marines, "Gunny" Highway quickly molded them into a cohesive fighting team. Every morning, he took accountability of his Marines. When not present, Highway uncovered personal issues that he was able to help rectify, thus building trust. He inspected each Marine, diligently ensuring all were within Marine Corps' standards, and said, "If you look like Marines, you'll start acting like Marines."[2]

Leaders must create a culture that normalizes inspections and correction. Morning parade is a terrific opportunity to showcase our profession and teach NCOs to instill discipline, make on the spot corrections, and administer remedial training. We must train our NCOs in the art of the professional confrontation and the importance of regular inspections to achieve discipline within our units. Empowering NCOs to

A leader in Company E, 9th Infantry Regiment inspects his troops at a camp in Tampa, FL, circa 1898-1900. (National Archives photo)

lead during PT builds confidence to lead in other areas, including combat. PT provides a routine and low-threat opportunity to teach training management and risk management, and to encourage NCOs to read doctrine. Finally, morning parade and PT are foundational for building cohesive teams through empathetic leadership, competition, and shared hardship. They instill discipline, teach training management, and build cohesive teams while reinforcing that the NCO Corps is the backbone of the Army.

Training Standards and Discipline

Baron Von Steuben said, "The oftener the Soldiers are under the inspection of their officers the better; for which reason every morning at troop meeting they must inspect into the dress of their men; see that their clothes are whole and put on properly; their hands and faces washed clean; their hair combed; their accoutrements properly fixed, and every article about them in the greatest of order."[3] Since the founding of our Army, we have recognized the connection between looking and acting like a Soldier, and that following basic rules would collectively build a disciplined unit capable of more than the sum of its parts. Von Steuben established that morning parade is an important way to create a foundation of discipline. That commitment starts with simple compliance and military bearing.

Leaders want a formation that is committed to the Army's values and our mission. Commitment takes time in a healthy culture with leaders consistently modeling professional behavior and enforcing standards. As leaders, we often overlook the value of simple compliance; some even write it off as an act of coercion. Few people are fully committed to the organization when they join the Army. Meanwhile, the Army regularly presents new ideas or tasks that test the wills of even the most committed Soldiers. These new ideas often take time to take root in our formations as we may only comply with them as we warm to change, usually after debating and improving the concept. After all, we do not want lemmings; we want Soldiers to think through problems, generate new ideas, and refine our techniques. But to get to commitment, you need consistent compliance, and to get consistent compliance, you must train leaders to enforce standards.

We cannot expect Soldiers or leaders to perform tasks we have not trained them to conduct, and this is true of enforcing standards. Army doctrine establishes the science of control and the art of command.[4] While regulations, policy, and general military authority clearly produce control, the difficult portion is mastering the art of professional confrontation. Learning to correct others is challenging. Doing so professionally, while the other person is defiant or dismissive, is even more difficult. It is important that NCOs sternly but politely explain the infraction and supervise the correction. If handled incorrectly, leaders worry they open themselves to an inspector general (IG) complaint, investigation, or at the very least, embarrassment. Through proper training, understanding of general military authority, and adoption of a specific methodology for making corrections, leaders can keep the emotions and friction between the corrected Soldier and the standard rather than themselves. Mastering the art of the professional confrontation takes practice. Morning parade provides a consistent training event where leaders can train the art of the professional confrontation.

Many leaders and Soldiers dislike formations, viewing them as a waste of time, but morning parade is the optimal event for training leaders to enforce standards. Author Simon Sinek would urge us to start with why.[5] To gain commitment, we must first explain the reasons and benefits for conducting morning parade. Leaders can hold morning parade immediately before PT starts or after Soldiers have returned to start the day's work. It should always start with the accountability of each Soldier. If an NCO cannot account for a Soldier, then finding him or her becomes the priority. While often a formal inspection performed from open ranks, morning parade can be as simple as junior leaders walking down the line looking over each of their Soldiers and correcting deficiencies. Confrontation is uncomfortable, but if young sergeants cannot tell their Soldiers that it is unacceptable to be unshaven, have an improper haircut, or be in the wrong uniform, they will not be able to enforce other standards. Morning formation is a low-threat environment that allows young leaders to inspect their Soldiers under the watchful eye of seasoned NCOs. This must be normalized and understood as an organizational expectation.

To inspect, you must know the standard, which forces NCOs to read regulations, local standard operating procedures (SOPs), and policies. Additionally, when NCOs find deficiencies, they learn to appropriately assign and supervise remedial training. When NCOs fall short of what is expected during morning parade, or they are overzealous in the application of remedial training, senior NCOs are there to guide them. As the NCOs are trained, so are the Soldiers. After consistent inspections and remedial training, junior Soldiers will start to police themselves. Not only do Soldiers learn the standard of professional conduct, but they also learn how to be corrected. We have all made a simple on-the-spot correction that needlessly escalated to an unprofessional or emotional outburst. This is because the Soldier is not accustomed to being corrected. Soldiers must be conditioned to meet the standard and take professional criticism. This conduct, forged during morning parade, has tactical and ethical implications as well.

Conducting routine inspections, following SOPs, and enforcing standards have direct tactical and ethical implications that impact combat readiness. Units that do not inspect and enforce standards in garrison will not conduct pre-combat checks and inspections in training or combat. Senior NCOs who do not supervise the application of corrective training risk having counterproductive leaders who are not empowered to lead within the principles of mission command. NCOs who cannot correct their own Soldiers in the unit area will not intervene when they see other more serious offenses like sexual harassment or racially charged behavior. NCOs who cut their teeth during morning parade gain confidence in themselves and their understanding of the standard. This gives them the moral courage to use general military authority to correct Soldiers from other formations.

Training Management

PT is a regularly occurring training event that maximizes opportunities for young leaders to learn the tenets of training management. Training management is essential for readying combat forces. Empowering young NCOs to plan and lead PT will help them understand training management, gain confidence in giving orders, and embolden them to lead in other areas. Furthermore, the better they understand the training management process, the better they can assist or lead more complex training. Central to the training management process is the eight-step training model.

Soldiers assigned to 2nd Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment carry equipment across a football field during a physical training event in Vicenza, Italy, on 6 June 2023.
(Photo by PFC Samantha Powers)

The eight-step training model is the foundation of all training in the Army. It takes numerous training events for NCOs to understand the nuances of each step. PT allows NCOs to do this in a way that will not waste resources or distract from training objectives. Worst case, PT goes a little long or a senior NCO must add some distance or repetitions to make up for a lackluster session. The more repetitions that NCOs get at planning PT, the better prepared they are to run other training events. Leading PT and using the eight-step training model will force NCOs to research and read doctrine. Whether it is how the Army Publishing Directorate is organized, the differences in field manuals and training circulars, or simply how to search or use the index to find needed information, referencing PT materials becomes a formative experience. Holistic health and fitness (H2F) teams are a great resource for assisting NCOs with leader certification and planning. While H2F can assist, NCOs cannot abdicate their responsibility to lead PT nor outsource planning. Scheduling time to adequately assess risk and conduct the eight steps necessary for successful training is important for teaching NCOs vital lessons.

Time management and risk assessment provide organizational calm, combat effectiveness, and are critical to unit success. Forcing NCOs to think through risk during PT in a relatively controlled environment will teach them to do it during more complex scenarios in training and combat. Properly conducting all eight steps of the training model and completing a proper risk assessment require time. Time management is best done on a schedule. Schedules completed on time, vetted by senior NCOs, and posted in unit areas provide predictability. Organizational calm gained through proper training management and predictability directly impacts Soldiers' morale and welfare. Proper execution of morning parade, along with well-prepared and challenging PT, lays a foundation for cohesive teams.

Cohesion

There are many factors that intersect to form cohesive teams. Morning parade offers an opportunity for leaders to observe and hear from their formation. Savvy NCOs understand that while Soldiers are waiting, they are talking about what is going on in their lives. Soldiers speak about the issues they are facing at home, proud parent moments, financial struggles, and other pertinent information. Non-verbal cues are equally important. NCOs should pick up on someone who smells of alcohol, looks excessively tired, or is abnormally quiet. These are opportunities for NCOs to provide "under the oak tree counseling" and, when necessary, leverage resources such as a financial counselor, an appointment with the unit chaplain, or lifestyle classes through Army Community Service. When it's positive, they can share in the Soldier's joy and reenforce their connection. Morning formation provides a regular opportunity to connect with the entire team.

PT is instrumental to building cohesive teams. Well-designed and prepared PT sessions, planned by NCOs who used the eight-step training model, create fertile ground for bringing people together. No one wants to come in early in the morning to waste time participating in a poorly conceived and executed PT session. Subpar training erodes trust in leaders. Working out regularly with your unit builds connection. It makes everyone vulnerable, as you see each other's strengths and weaknesses. This provides opportunities to encourage each other and, through discussion and counseling, work together to improve. Being together is essential to the team-building process. Solders often complain that they want to work out alone. You cannot build a team if you are not together, and you forfeit the numerous benefits of morning parade, training management, and cohesion. If there was any lesson to be learned from COVID, for most units, individual PT undermines unit readiness. There are always exceptions while traveling or during special assignments, but largely, working out together is a must. Leaders should balance their PT schedules between fitness and toughness.

This balance will promote team building, combat readiness, and cohesion. Fitness directly ties to performance on the battlefield. Leaders must arrive to the objective with enough stamina to clearly think through problems and calmly deliver orders. Soldiers can be technically and tactically competent, but if they cannot move their brain around the battlefield, think critically, and execute tasks to standard, the mission will fail.

Soldiers attending the Basic Leader Course at the NCO Academy in Hawaii team up to flip a tire during a PT competition on 25 February 2022 at Schofield Barracks, HI. (Photo by SGT Christopher Thompson)

Regular exercise and healthy bodies are key components to mental health. Units composed of Soldiers with strong mental health will come together faster and deal with adversity better. PT should regularly include competitions. Competition builds strong bonds and esprit de corps by pushing and toughening Soldiers, and toughness matters in combat. Shared hardship builds teams. Some PT sessions must be a gut check to build toughness and resiliency. Soldiers must occasionally endure poor weather conditions and not hide in the gym. They should participate in combatives, conduct battle-focused PT in kit, and foot march even if they're not a combat arms Soldier. Sometimes, this may come at the detriment of an Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) score, but it will provide intangible benefits greater than a few points lost on the exam. Fit, tough, and cohesive teams win on the battlefield and in life.

Conclusion

In summary, standards and discipline are essential for cohesive and ready combat forces. NCOs must be trained in the art of the professional confrontation. Morning parade provides opportunities for young NCOs to learn to inspect, apply remedial training, and coach their Soldiers to improve. Consistent enforcement of standards trains Soldiers to professionally accept correction and coaching. Morning parade allows senior NCOs the routine opportunity to tutor junior NCOs about regulatory standards and corrective training techniques. Morning formation is the first chance for leaders to assess the welfare of their formation and build bonds with their Soldiers through conversation. Furthermore, physical training allows formations to bond through shared hardship. Physical training sessions are opportunities for young leaders to exercise the eight-step training model, understand the risk mitigation process, and study doctrine. Well-planned and executed PT sessions contribute to healthy bodies and minds, which aides in building cohesive teams. Morning parade and PT instill discipline, teach training management, and build cohesive teams while reinforcing that the NCO Corps is the backbone of the Army.

Notes

[1] U.S. Army Center of Military History, "Washington Takes Command of Continental Army in 1775," Army

News Service, 15 April 2016, https://www.army.mil/article/40819/washington_takes_command_of_continental_army_in_1775.

[2] *Heartbreak Ridge*, directed by Clint Eastwood (Malpaso Productions, 1983).

[3] Baron Friedrich Von Steuben, Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States (Philadelphia: Syner and Cist, 1779), https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/wp-content/uploads/Von-Steubens-Blue-Book.pdf.

[4] Army Doctrine Publication, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, July 2019, .

[5] Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (NY: Portfolio, 2011).

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