



U.S. Army Spc. Samantha Blanchard, left, and U.S. Army Spc. Phi Hoang, rear center, provide medical treatment to their simulated patient, U.S. Army Sgt. Asa Walz, center, at a Justified Accord 2026 combined casualty evacuation training exercise with Kenya Defence Forces medics at Laresoro Range, Isiolo, Kenya, March 1, 2026. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. James Toohey)

## UNCHECKING THE BLOCK

### Addressing the “Check-the-Box” Mindset in Army Training

By Sergeant Taylor Highsmith

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The Army maintains a wide variety of training programs and curricula at institutional, operational, and self-development levels. Within the operational domain—beyond Soldier general skills, branch-specific competencies, and mission-essential task list (METL) requirements—there is another category of training that is often overlooked. These are the annual mandatory requirements familiar to every Service member yet frequently undervalued at the individual level. Trainings such as Military Equal Opportunity (MEO), Financial Management, Suicide Prevention, Leader Professional Development (LPD), and Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP), among others, are essential but not directly applicable to Soldier or branch-specific missions.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

Individually, these programs provide tremendous value—both in their impact on readiness and in their contribution to Soldier welfare. The challenge emerges when balancing mandatory training with mission-specific requirements and day-to-day duties. Training to maintain and enhance the lethality of individuals and organizations in a non-operational environment remains one of a unit’s most critical responsibilities. When combined with routine obligations such as gate security or equipment maintenance, it becomes easy to see how additional requirements may feel unimportant or burdensome.

Organizations should thoughtfully assess annual training requirements, such as MEO, to ensure effective implementation. LPD sessions should be used deliberately and meaningfully,

rather than treating annual requirements as items to simply check off. By prioritizing genuine engagement and comprehension, organizations can improve learning outcomes and cultivate a more informed and capable force. We see this reflected in the structure of many organizations’ training cells, which often maintain literal checklists of mandatory requirements and look for opportunities to “squeeze in the things we need to check off.”

This attitude of “just get it done so that we can get back to actual work” has become a slow-moving cancer at the heart of some of the Army’s most vital programs. No leader would claim that Equal Opportunity or SHARP is unimportant, nor is the issue rooted in a lack of care or an institutional disbelief in their value. The problem stems from prioritization.

The pressure to meet mission requirements and prepare for the constantly shifting demands of modern combat can make topics like Soldier financial management feel trivial by comparison. This mindset becomes evident in how units conduct mandatory training. A leader may speak passionately about the importance of a program, but an apathetic execution immediately afterward renders both the message and the training ineffective. Soldiers often view the most important part of the training as signing in so their records are updated. Meanwhile, trainers must follow specific steps to ensure that the training is considered valid. When combined with limited time for planning and execution, the result is often someone

reading directly from a slideshow and asking scripted check-on-learning questions.

Even the selection process for trainers can undermine these programs when individuals are chosen for career progression rather than for their suitability to the subject matter. Concurrent training often reflects the same issue. When well planned and aligned with the main training event, concurrent training can significantly enhance overall effectiveness. Conversely, poorly planned or mismatched training degrades participant motivation and reduces the effectiveness of the entire event. All of these challenges stem from a central problem: treating training as merely something to complete.

Implementing a thoughtful and structured interview process is essential for improving how organizations select trainers and program managers. A deliberate approach ensures that candidates are chosen based on their skills, experience, alignment with organizational goals, and genuine passion for the work. While serving in roles such as EO or SHARP representative can support career development, prioritizing career progression over program effectiveness ultimately undermines the very initiatives we seek to improve. It can be difficult to find individuals who not only possess the required knowledge and certifications but also have the enthusiasm these programs demand. Selecting the right trainer is the most critical factor in the success of any training, regardless of level.

Financial management is a clear example of this problem. Organizations often select individuals with little interest in the subject and train them only to the minimum standard. Even when a subject matter expert from outside the unit is brought in, that individual is rarely a volunteer—and the lack of genuine investment shows in the quality of instruction.

Organizationally, prioritizing assigned missions and mission-specific training over general Soldier-welfare training is understandable. When mission requirements force leaders to cut events, it makes sense to eliminate the perceived “nonessentials” first. The issue is not where these trainings fall within the hierarchy of priorities, but rather the level of effort and care devoted to them. As a force, we strive to gain and maintain dominance across all operational domains. Even when one domain is considered less critical for a particular conflict, we do not trivialize it. The same principle should guide how we approach every form of training.

We can address this issue by focusing on its two root causes. First, the selection of trainers requires a shift in priorities. When choosing a program representative or event trainer, passion and willingness must take precedence. The American military prides itself on being an all-volunteer force, asserting that this model produces highly motivated and effective Service members. That same principle should direct us on how we select our trainers.

This process begins at the lowest levels of leadership and aligns with the “This is my squad” mentality. Knowing each Soldier’s interests and strengths is the foundation for identifying future trainers. While some programs may rarely attract individuals who are genuinely passionate about them, these cases are the exception rather than the rule. The key is developing leaders who are themselves interested in developing others. To support this effort, organizational changes are also necessary.

At the institutional level, we can begin by redefining training goals for junior officers and noncommissioned officers to emphasize not only meeting requirements but also engaging and developing their trainees. This shift can start as early as basic combat training, where instructors should model deliberate, enthusiastic, and effective approaches to conducting training. Within the operational force, organizations must cultivate an environment that takes pride in their training programs and continually strives to improve them.

Technology plays a critical role in consistently improving the training environment. New advancements in technology enable more comprehensive training both in person and through digital media. Modern training equipment and software allow units to “train as you fight” with greater efficiency, safety, and realism.

Rectifying organizational issues is not an easy task. Leaders must start making changes to the way we conduct, plan, and even talk about training. Teaching new leaders *how* to train is only the first step. We must also instill in them a genuine passion for developing others.

This begins with establishing both short- and long-range goals. In the short term, individuals who are truly invested in a topic can inspire others to follow their example. One motivated trainer can become the catalyst for many, multiplying the effectiveness of the force. In the long term, the goal is to build a culture that allocates appropriate time and resources for training, regardless of its perceived priority. As leaders, we must eliminate the habit of throwing together last-minute training simply to claim completion.

Understanding that peripheral training—such as SHARP, EO, Financial Management, and others—are lower in priority at an organizational level, we must still maintain our commitment to conducting it well. Our goal as leaders should be to eliminate the mindset of training merely to “check the box.” Trainers are the critical element in the process, and selecting the right individuals is essential. As the architects of training, we must prioritize identifying people who possess both the motivation and the expertise to excel, and ensure that they have the resources needed to succeed. The principle of “train as you fight,” embedded in our doctrine, reinforces the idea that no mission is unimportant—and by extension, no training should be trivialized. ✕

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## References

<sup>1</sup> Department of the Army, *ADP 1-0 The Army*, Edited by M. A. Milley and M. F. Averill. Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Department of the Army, *ADP 7-0 Training*, Edited by R. A. George and K. S. Miller, Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2024.