

Opinion

Commentary

Faith, not fear, should drive senior leaders

As the military gets smaller, we must take great care not to fall in the same trap experienced by the Army after the Vietnam War — a zero-defects mentality. This is especially important for senior enlisted and officer leaders. Senior leaders have a much wider range of influence. Subordinates will most often thrive in an environment where they are trusted and where their superiors demonstrate faith in their performance.

When, on occasion, those subordinates fail, it is just as important for superiors to forgive those failures. A zero-defects mentality on the part of senior leaders ensures declining morale with a related drop in potential combat effectiveness.

Of course, this is all about risk. Senior leaders are liable to their superiors for everything their subordinates do or fail to do. The results of a zero-defects mentality on the part of senior leaders is predictable — micromanagement. Micromanagement, in turn, destroys individual initiative. We fail to trust and demonstrate faith in our subordinates' performance at the peril of mission accomplishment. Worse, senior microman-

agement breeds more of the same in subordinates, until entire units are crippled with indecision and fear. Senior leaders who are unwilling to trust ultimately destroy the effectiveness of the organizations they lead.

Fear is at the root of this problem. Selective Early Retirement Boards, reductions in force and voluntary release programs have brought to the fore the fact that, in many cases, one "black mark" on a leader's efficiency report can end a career. The result of this situation is also predictable: since leaders are judged on the accomplishments of their organizations, fear of failure compels many leaders to strive for perfect organizational records. This, of course, is inhuman.

In an attempt to reach this unobtainable goal of perfection, these same leaders will literally drive subordinates to distraction. Demands for constant updates on progress, insistence that paperwork be "just right," unwillingness to listen to requests for more time, help and resources, will convince juniors that their input is worthless. Their self-image and self-worth will suffer. Subordinate recommendations that are ignored by superiors will soon ensure there will be no more recommendations.

Instead of striving for perfection, senior leaders would do better to aim for the attainable objective of sustained excellence — recognizing that subordinates will err. It is also important to note that despite "orders," subordinates, as human beings, will feel compelled to add personal perspectives and ideas to the accomplishment of organizational projects. Encouraging juniors to use imagination and judgment helps build unit cohesion and personal and institutional loyalty. These are human traits that cannot be bought — they have to be earned.

Loyalty is necessary to the overall health and welfare of military organizations. A key ingredient in developing it is a senior leader's faith in subordinates. To demonstrate that faith takes courage — trust doesn't come easily for most. Yet, faith in one's subordinates is critical to the es-

tablishment of a positive command climate. It is imperative that seniors demonstrate faith in subordinates' abilities by providing the necessary deadlines, guidance and resources, then "get out of the way." Few subordinates enjoy the specter of a boss who feels compelled to constantly look over his or her shoulder.

Forgiveness is often crucial, and just as often overlooked when dealing with the failures of subordinates. Failure is something all of us have had to face. How subordinates deal with it is determined largely by a senior leader's reaction and subsequent actions. Telling a junior that another failure is something that will be "read about" — meaning on the next efficiency report — is counterproductive.

A failure is an opportunity to conduct informal counseling and to enhance training. That's why many units conduct after-action reviews. Smart leaders find ways to put a positive face on, and to learn from even the worse mistakes of subordinates and themselves. Taking a moment to tell a subordinate that a failure is forgiven will not only take an enormous load off that soldier, but will help to establish a stronger bond of loyalty — it is all part of the unquantifiable "human equation."

Those subordinates who repetitively betray the trust and faith placed in them need to be disciplined, and if required, removed from service, either by the mechanisms of efficiency reports or the Uniform Code of Military Justice. But these cases are the few.

The zero-defects mentality of the Army in the post-Vietnam era must not be allowed to become the *modus operandi* of the service today. I hope today's leaders, unlike some of those of yesteryear, remain aware of the dangers and avoid the crippling effects of micromanagement. Trust, faith and forgiveness, although not common military topics, remain important to we humans in uniform.

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