

The 'How' Counts ... A Lot

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Army

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Most of us spend a great deal of time attending to our "to do" lists. Some of us have lists of what we want to accomplish for each day, for the week and for the month. Some even have lists of semiannual and yearly objectives.

How we carry out tasks that we list for ourselves (or tasks on lists we receive from others) matters and matters a lot. How we lead or manage will either strengthen or weaken the core of our Army, its soul and its heart. I don't mean soul or heart in either a religious or medical sense. Rather, I suggest only that we understand our soul and our heart as that which distinguishes our Army from other armies: what makes us who we are.

From this perspective, our soul, I believe, has three parts: our training methodology, our values and our NCO Corps.

We train differently from any army with which I am familiar. Our focus is on performance-oriented training: Do the task; don't just talk about it. Our methodology requires leaders to identify a task or set of tasks upon which individuals, other leaders or units are to train, set the right conditions in which the identified tasks can actually be done, and evaluate the execution of the tasks to a published set of standards. If the tasks are performed to standard, training is complete. If not, training continues until they are done to standard. All training is followed by an after action review so that all involved can learn not only what happened, but also why. Continuous learning by doing is the core of the U.S. Army training methodology. We are hard on ourselves when we train and when we conduct after action reviews.

When we train this way, we strengthen this part of our soul. When we don't, we weaken it. The longer and more consistently we train this way, the more we strengthen and transfer this part of our soul to future generations of soldiers and leaders. Conversely, the more we digress from our training methodology, the more we grow into a different army and the greater the gap between what we say as an organization and what we actually do.

The second part of our Army's soul, our values, consists of leadership, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage, both physical and moral. We create the trust that is so important in our profession when each of us, whether soldier or leader, acts consistently with our organization's values. These values are designed to govern everything we do. As with training, when values govern our actions, we strengthen this part of our soul and transfer it to the next generation of soldiers and leaders. And, once again, each time one of us strays from acting consistently with our values, we erode that trust, even if by just a little bit.

The third element of our soul is our NCO Corps. Ours is the greatest NCO Corps on the face of the Earth - made great because of the responsibility we give to NCOs, because of our selecttrain-promote model of NCO development and because of our outstanding NCO education system. I entered the Army at a time when our Army's NCO Corps was nothing compared to what it is now. I

witnessed junior and senior officers and sergeants fight to rebuild the NCO Corps. We all see the result: an NCO Corps that is the envy of many other armies.

When we take our NCO education system seriously by continually updating it and sending our sergeants to school - even if doing so creates a short-term gap in our unit - when we hold our NCO selection boards on time and choose the right soldiers for promotion, and when we give our NCOs the responsibility they should have in garrison as well as in combat, we strengthen this part of our Army's soul. When we don't, we weaken it. The longer and more consistently we weaken our NCO Corps, the more we risk becoming a different army and the more we grow the gap between what we say and what we actually do.

The tasks on our to do lists are important, but equally important is how we carry out those tasks. If we as leaders are very efficient at checking off our tasks, but we gain that efficiency by taking shortcuts in our training methodology - cheating a bit on one or more of our values, usurping the authority of NCOs, or interfering with NCO promotion or education - then our leadership is counterproductive to the long-term health of our Army's soul.

And the heart of our Army? Our spouses and volunteers. Think of what sterile environments our posts would be and how dull our units would be without the contributions of our spouses and volunteers. Their contributions create the communities in which we live and raise our children.

Communities are more than an aggregation of people living in proximity.

Communities are formed by neighbors who care for one another, who look after one another and who help one another. This is the huge contribution that our spouses and volunteers make. The communities they form are not just local communities within units or posts. By tying into formal Army organizations and processes, our spouses and volunteers form communities across the Army to the benefit of us all. Our lives are richer because of the commitment and contribution made each day by spouses and volunteers.

What do they ask in return? Not much. Leaders, however, need to acknowledge their contributions and honor their commitment. Here again, we leaders must ask ourselves: As we do things on our to do lists, are we doing them in such a way that we are strengthening or weakening the heart of our Army?

Each time we recognize the contribution and commitment of a spouse or volunteer, we strengthen our heart. The more we do so, the stronger our heart becomes. Formal recognition ceremonies are important in this regard; leaders at every echelon should attend them. Informal, small, daily recognitions by the leaders of the echelon at which the spouse or volunteer makes the contribution, however, may be even more important. All of us want our contributions to be recognized by those for whom we are making the effort; spouses and volunteers are no different.

If we leaders are very efficient at checking off our tasks, but we gain that efficiency at the expense of not taking the time to acknowledge and honor the contributions of spouses and volunteers, then our leadership is counterproductive to the long-term health of our Army's heart.

Making to do lists and driving ourselves and our organizations to accomplish what's on them is important. Making things happen is one of the keys to successful leadership assuming, of course, that the things we're making happen are the right things and that we are making them happen in the right way. That's the point. A leader can measure pretty well whether he or she is making the right things happen. It's usually visible in the short term, for example, in a quarterly training brief, a unit status report or a monthly maintenance report. It's harder, however, for a leader to see whether he or she is making things happen in the right way whether he or she is strengthening or weakening our Army's soul and heart. That requires a longer view, a different perspective.

Understanding that our Army has a soul and a heart provides a framework that encourages that longer view and perspective. The framework is useful to remind each of us that we are responsible for our part of the soul and heart associated with our scope of responsibility. Ten years from now, will our leadership and management have contributed to strengthening our Army's soul and heart or weakening them? The answer to that question is affected every day in how each of us does what we do as leaders. Leaders at every level - officer and NCO - are the only guarantee that our Army's soul and heart will be strong. How we do what we do matters, and it matters a lot.