

You Can't Say No: Find a Way to Say Yes

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In today's U.S. Army culture, when leaders are directing subordinates to complete a task saying no is normally not an option. One must find a way to yes, no matter the task. This "can do" attitude can achieve spectacular results, inspire innovation, or drive initiative. The down side is that it can also establish an unethical or toxic environment. In finding a way to yes there is tremendous potential for subordinates to do so, regardless of the ethics or legality. Often subordinates may operate in the gray area, rationalizing that it is ethical or legal. Many in the U.S. Army believe that the topic of lying, or even suggesting that lying happens often, is an affront to the Army profession. However, studies over the past decade show that a problem exists. Acknowledging the problem exists is the first step in solving that problem. As an institution, the Army must acknowledge that senior leaders often ask for information, and expect to hear yes to all queries.

Literature Review

One overarching operating paradigm that has been part of business theory for the past 25 years is the Bathsheba Syndrome. Ludwig and Longenecker wrote about the Bathsheba Syndrome in their 1993 article stating, "Research suggests that many managers are poorly prepared to deal with success."¹ This would indicate that as senior leaders move up the ladder within an organization, they are not properly prepared for the benefits and power that comes with this success. Success also includes "privileged access, unrestrained control, and ability to manipulate outcomes."² Therefore, the business world understands that individuals moving up higher into greater levels of responsibility are increasingly tempted to use their position for excess and corruption. The authors surmised that ethical failures from the 1980's into the 1990's was a "result of success and lack of preparedness in dealing with personal and organizational success."³ This seems to match some of the same operating environment experienced by the U.S. military since 9/11. More often than not, operations conducted supporting OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF 2003-2009), OPERATION NEW DAWN (OND 2009-2011), OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE (OIR 2011-present), and OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM (2001-present) were successful by self-measurements. During this same time we have seen a number of high profile senior officers who did not meet the challenges of their success. The most recent is a wide ranging and long-term scandal involving senior Navy officers and contractors.⁴

Some state that toxic leaders may be the problem. Within the literature some toxic leaders were described as "they succeed by tearing others down."⁵ Others seem to focus on attributes already mentioned. For example, in Kathy Simmons "Executive Update Online," Rob Rosner describes a toxic atmosphere. "It's all about ends; nothing is said about the means." If the U.S. Army can be described in simple terms, it is about accomplishing tasks or getting things done. Toxic leaders are present in our force, which is confirmed by numerous studies conducted over the past decade. During this same period, doctrine was further refined in regards to changing from battle command to mission command.

The U.S. Army is a very commander centric organization and the unit commander is central to everything the unit does or fails to do. This unique positional power is coupled with mission command (the Army's philosophy of command). "The concept traces its roots back to the German concept of *Auftragstaktik*,

which translates roughly to mission-type tactics. *Auftragstaktik* held all German commissioned and noncommissioned officers duty bound to do whatever the situation required, as they personally saw it.”⁶ Through mission command, commanders drive the operational process, develop teams within their organization, and inform and influence audiences inside and outside of their commands.

This combination of mission command and the power of the commander allows units who employ it properly to accomplish great things on the battlefield, in training, and even in garrison operations. This philosophy is based on leaders who exemplify and live by the Army values. If the leader is toxic or someone who is only results driven (ends justify the means), there is potential to establish a less than ethical environment.

A good commander understands the impact their words and actions have on the units command and ethical climates. In ethical command climates, subordinates are not punished for bearing bad news or making honest mistakes. In fact, making honest mistakes and establishing trust (being honest in word and deed) are cornerstones of the mission command philosophy. Toxic and ineffective leaders have a tendency to look at only results. They are concerned about what their boss or their boss’s boss will see or are interested in, and have been successful by achieving spectacular, short-term results. Because of personnel management policies, leaders may trade long-term effects for short term gain because they will reap the reward of the success, but not be in the unit when the negative impacts appear. I contend it is in these environments that people say things like, “You can’t say no! Your job is to find a way to yes, I don’t care how you get it done, just get it done.” These are situations where the leader may set the conditions for an unethical climate.

Current Operations

The current operations detailed earlier are strenuous to all components of the U.S. Army. The nearly continuous operations and persistent conflict causes people to execute the Army leadership requirements model unevenly. (See Figure 1 on page 33.) The bottom half of the model includes leads and achieves. The operations since 9/11 have almost entirely focused on this part of the model. Continuous operations, deployments, redeployments, and repeat actions ensure that leaders and Soldiers understand and constantly exercise this portion of the model. In fact, very few individuals are in trouble or relieved for problems of leading, competency, or getting results. Almost every relief for cause action (in the U.S. Army) from the past 30 years was based upon some error in the attributes portion of this model. The number of officers relieved for competence during that same time is miniscule by both data points and a review of news articles.

Why is this so? What does this have to do with not taking no for an answer? What else is influencing our current operations over the past decade? One major issue is overseas contingency operations or OCO.

OCO started as “supplemental” in 2001 and in 2009 was formally known as Overseas Contingency Operations. In general terms, it is designed to provide emergency funding for missions that come about unexpectedly. Some facts must be understood about this category of money. It is not in the base budget, nor has it ever been in its existence during our recent and current military operations. This is funding in addition to military “operations and maintenance” budget resources. Since it is not part of the base budget in pragmatic terms, it is not subject to the same oversight or justification of base budget line items. “Because OCO funding is intended for war-related activities that cannot be forecasted well in advance, it is not restricted by the Budget Control Act (BCA) budget caps.”⁸ Therefore, “administrations have moved items from the base budget to the OCO budget as a way of circumventing the BCA budget caps.”⁹ In terms of the Congress, “OCO is a great way to authorize funds without having to exercise the same level of oversight and responsibility. Because OCO can swing so drastically from year to year, this also leaves Congress the option to ‘turn off the spigot’ without confronting the same level of institutional resistance that a base budget cut might provoke.”¹⁰ Within the military, this “slush fund” has been used to support base operations and not wartime costs.¹¹ However, the problem exists and the military must acknowledge it.

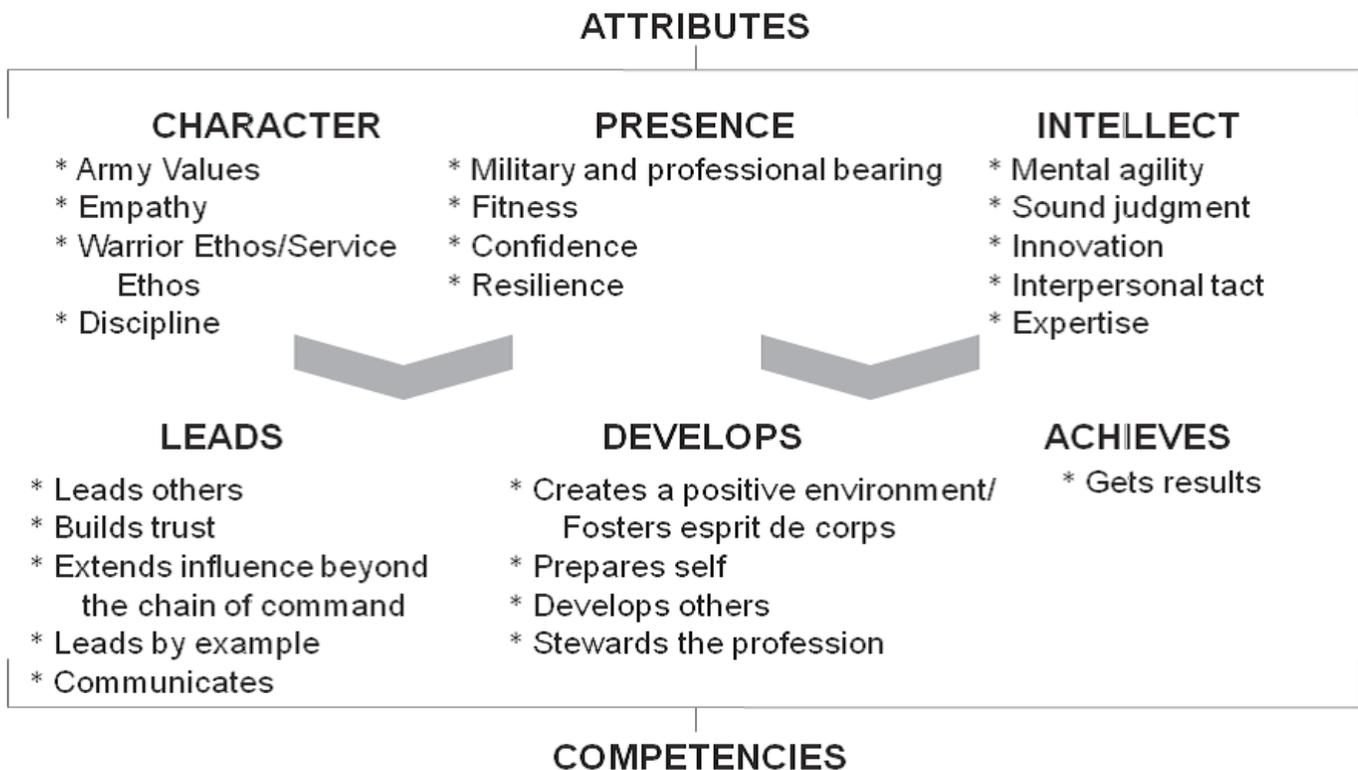


Figure 1. The Army leadership requirements model⁷

Problem?

In today’s military culture it is believed some leaders are asking about accomplishment of tasks and the only requirements is to find a way to say yes. Why is the current environment within the U.S. Army conducive to less than truthful answers about tasks? In other words, why are senior leaders seemingly only looking for yes to questions of status, task completion, and readiness?

Acknowledging a problem comes down to several key concepts and ideas. The first is acceptance. Accepting an ethical norm is not necessarily practical throughout the U.S. Army. This acknowledgement must first take place. It is a foregone conclusion based upon Wong and Gerras¹² work that lying does take place. Their research from self-reported survey data demonstrates that Soldiers across COMPOS (composition of forces) at all levels of organizations confirm that lying does take place.

A number of ethical and contracting issues were noted in the 2015 GAO Report on Military Personnel: Additional Steps are Needed to Strengthen DOD’s Oversight of Ethics and Professionalism Issues. This report discussed all the ethics, training, education, and measuring outcomes surrounding military personnel. A number of steps were taken to ensure that oversight was provided to all DOD leaders. One in particular seems to be indicative of how serious the administration understood the problem of ethics and decision making in senior officers.

In November 2012, President Obama “directs the Secretary of Defense to review general and flag office ethics training.”¹³ This seems incredulous, but what other time has a president directed the leader of our defense organizations to conduct such analysis? Therefore, it would seemed that based upon a number of high profile and flagrant violations of senior military officers (predominately) from 2010-2012, that the POTUS was aware of problems we may have with military officers ethical conduct. This action is just one of many that were covered and recommended by this GAO report.

Recommendations

Under the new guidelines of talent management, some metric of ethics could be produced and tracked. Ethical bearing or moral metrics may be hard to quantify, but managing talent in the U.S. Army demands that we are able to identify those who exhibit these behaviors via some other independent means. It seems that based upon the cases identified in this paper, an ethical measure should be investigated for use in assessment potential and providing another data point for ethical behavior. Last year during this CGSC Ethics Symposium, Dr. Tom Gibbons proposed such a solution. His other suggestions included using the Defining Issues Test (DIT)¹⁴ as one of the “most extensively validated and most widely used measure of moral judgment.”¹⁵ This metric is more direct because it “allows subjects to select from a list of responses rather than formulate a response to an interviewee’s open-ended question.”¹⁶ Using this or another measure to try to identify ones ethical reasoning would be a great enhancement to not just talent management, but overall officer assessment.

Another recommendation involves the Command and General Staff Officer Course. For a number of years the core course required eight hours of ethics instructions for all students, including resident, satellite, and distance learning (which includes some 7600+students annually). In addition, based upon recommendations from the Gansler Report,¹⁷ another eight hours of contracting were required in K200. The K200 course was taught within the advanced operations course (AOC) and not the core; therefore, not all satellite students received this instruction. The ethics instruction for AY 2017 was integrated into the core and the K200 contracting instruction was reduced to two hours.

In regards to both doing what is ethical correct and not continue the new normal of OCO funding, maybe we should listen and follow closely what GEN Milley, chief of staff (CSA) recently expressed to Congress on the issue of a budget. Continuing to pass continuing resolution (CR) after CR on a defense budget is “the new normal.” GEN Milley stated, “A year-long CR or a return to the [budget control act] funding (risks our national security). It will increase risk to the nation and it will ultimately result in dead Americans on a future battlefield.”¹⁸ GEN Milley, in response to this systemic CR continuation as a new normal, based on a question from Rep. Susan Davis from California said, “I don’t accept that it is the new normal, congresswoman. Candidly, failure to pass a budget, in my view as both an American citizen and the chief of staff of the United States Army, constitutes professional malpractice.”¹⁹

Conclusion

Persistent conflict, as experienced by the military over the past sixteen or so years, does provide a “new normal.” This environment is where military leaders are required to operate. For the foreseeable future, military officers will continue to function within OCO funding and will most likely use self-measured metrics for assessing performance. Within this, new normal ethical considerations are even more important for all leaders. All commanders should not expect nor demand to hear yes to every mission or query. Ethical concerns are paramount in developing and maintaining formations that continue to act with moral courage.

Endnotes

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- 5 COL George E. Reed, "U.S. Army, Toxic Leadership," *Military Review*, July-August (2004): 67.
- 6 US Army, *ADRP 6-0 Mission Command*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 10 September 2012) v.
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- 11 Personal Communication with a Finance Office from CGSOC AY 2017.
- 12 Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession* (United States Army War College Press, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2015).
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- 17 U.S. Congress. Report of the "Commission on Army Acquisition and Program Management in Expeditionary Operations," by Jacques S. Gansler. Cong. Place of publication not identified: Commission on Army Acquisition and Program Management in Expeditionary Operations, 2007.
- 18 Matthew Cox, "Consequence of Budget Failure? 'Dead Americans,' Chief Says," *Military.com*, (2017):<https://www.dodbuzz.com/2017/04/05/consequence-budget-failure-dead-americans-chief-says/> (accessed on 10 April 2017).
- 19 Cox, "Consequence of Budget Failure? 'Dead Americans,' Chief Says."