

# How Can the United States Army Leverage the Strengths of Three Disparate Generations to Fight and Win the Nation's Wars?

by Robert M. Farmer

Guided by our professional ethos, our leaders and units will continue the Army's transformation into an agile, expert, innovative, interoperable, expeditionary, scalable, versatile, and balanced force that can provide additional strategic options for civilian and military leaders in future crises.<sup>1</sup>

—The Army Vision: Strategic Advantage

Because absolute confidentiality protects sacred communication, Army chaplains hear Soldiers' thoughts and grievances and those Soldiers give them without fear of retribution or reprisal. I am honored to be one such chaplain. During interactions with individuals in the performance of my duties, I noticed several differences in attitude that concerned me as an Army officer, counselor, and spiritual advisor. I noted that specific issues and behavior patterns could be categorized and segregated by age.

I have learned that these age groups are called generations and are part of the naming convention of the generational theory. Most Soldiers in the U.S. Army are between the ages of 22 and 30.<sup>2</sup> At the time of this writing, most of the U.S. Army is Generation Z, also known as millennials. The Army's leadership, however, is largely comprised of Generations X and Y. Only the very highest general officers remain from the boomer generation. Generations X, Y, and Z perceive and interpret the Army values model (afterwards referred interchangeably as "LDRSHIP") in diverse ways based on their worldview.<sup>3</sup>

Generational theory asserts that patterns of behavior and reactions are similar for groups of people born during a specific period. Their shared timeline fosters a common worldview with similar cultural experiences.<sup>4</sup> My observations found consistent, generational reactions to the institutionalization of the Army's LDRSHIP values in Army culture. Therefore, generational theories might apply to explain the observed differences in values and provide guidance on how to minimize the disparity between groups who must work closely together. Specifically, I wanted to address behaviors that could upset good order and discipline in the force and limit operational capability in units. Preventing interpersonal problems not only preserves resources, but eliminates friction between parties involved. My career as a chaplain puts me at the center of decreasing interpersonal strife, teaching conflict resolution, and enhancing communication skills as these relate to morale.<sup>5</sup> However, chaplains are not alone in this challenge. The organizational-level leader has the authority, responsibility, and accountability for decreasing conflict and increasing performance through establishing and maintaining a "good command climate." In the Army, the brigade commander is the leader who has perhaps the most influence to change Army culture, given the brigade-centric structure of the force and his or her direct influence on leadership at the battalion and company levels. Company commanders are the lowest-level leader with Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) authority to mete out punishment. Because the brigade commander guides the company commander in all leadership matters, including discipline and command climate, the brigade commander has broad influence and can

develop leaders early in their careers. Thus, as the Army's principal unit of combat power, charged with developing and implementing leadership policy to address challenges to the unit's capabilities, the brigade commander is critical to influencing cross-generationally.<sup>6</sup> The brigade commander is the focused audience for implementing the recommendations emanating from this research.

### **Generational Theory as it Pertains to the Army from 2017 to 2050**

Generational theory proposes that differences exist among generational cohorts and each generation has distinguishable, defining corporate views.<sup>7</sup> Most researchers in generational theory agree on how to define the generational cohorts. Generational theorists classify cohorts by year groups, with separations to begin and end each categorical bracket. Momentous events that change our culture, such as the end of World War II, create a dividing line between generations; these culture-altering events create new shared experiences and values which distinguish between generations.<sup>8</sup> Because any culture consists of shared beliefs formed from group values and norms, a generation's cultural experiences shape the values and the norms of their group. The values of the group are generally homogenous and based on events during their lives with which they cognitively and emotionally interacted—especially socially momentous events—technology application, scholastic standards, activities, vocations, and relationships to work, family, values, ideas, and time.<sup>9</sup> In short, members of each generation share common behaviors, beliefs, and desires.

The Army currently has four generations occupying the force: Boomer [aka baby boomer or me generation] (1946-1964), Generation X [aka baby buster, slacker, or Gen X] (1965-1980), Generation Y [aka echo boomer, Generation Y, or generation next] (1981-2000), and Generation Z [aka millennials] (those born after 2001 with a yet-to-be-determined endpoint).<sup>10</sup> (See Table 1 on page 39.) These groups each have unique values which affect how they interpret, use, and diverge from the Army's values. Significantly, generational values can be used to predict responses for each group, so reactions can be anticipated and either mitigated or maximized to achieve better unit cohesion, increase group and individual understanding, and provoke less interpersonal strife. Specifically, this research asks, "How can military leaders mitigate the negative relationship between a cohort's generational values and the Army values while using positive alignments of values to maximize the ability to project land power with Force 2050?"<sup>11</sup>

### **Generational Values**

The values of national executive and legislative leaders are usually tied to the national strategic goals. Rooted in America's foundational documents, laws, and strategic goals, our leaders attempt to sculpt what they think is the desired image of the nation. Strategic goals are the end state from which the operational approach is derived, bridging the gap between our current situation and our desired end state.<sup>12</sup> Values change over time and are influenced by many sources. Decision makers cast a vision and keep their end state in mind as they steer the country towards this goal. As decision making is influenced by the culture of the decision maker, Army culture influences Army decision makers. The Army values are part of Army culture and they should influence decisions made by leaders at all levels in the Army. If the Army values are not shared by those affected by a decision or order, then the decision or order may not make sense. If subordinates do not understand the decision or order, it is less likely to garner commitment and only achieves compliance. Today's operational environment values complexity and decentralized control under the concept of mission command, which requires Soldier commitment rather than compliance.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, bridging generational gaps to create shared understanding of the Army values becomes essential to good order and discipline in today's Army. Generational values are definable and give a clear picture of how—as a group—the individuals will conduct themselves, develop, and expect rewards. Research on generational behavior shows distinct differences across the generations.

It is the opinion of the author that the chief of chaplains has the best potential to influence epistemological and ethical issues within the force. The chief's special position and authority allow unilateral

Boomer	1946-1964
Generation X/Buster	1965-1980
Generation Y/Echo Boomer	1981-2000
Generation Z/Millennial	Beginning 2001

**Table 1. Generation Breakdown for Study**

implementation of policy to all chaplains. Although brigade commanders are spread throughout the force, the Army chief of staff (CoS) has capabilities analogous to the chief of chaplain’s influence over all chaplains. Influenced by the Army chief of staff, Brigade Commanders’ Course and annual evaluations may provide points of influence to direct brigade commanders with particular vision and feedback. The CoS’s purview is the entire Army and his or her brigade commanders have specific areas and means of influence beyond the Army chaplaincy. Brigade commanders in recruiting and initial entry training units, combat and support units, and across the components—active, reserve, and national guard—can lead the implementation in a significant and meaningful way tailored to their specific units’ mission. Their influence is paramount to no other single group. Brigade commanders do not have specific proponent capabilities for individual branches of service, but do command training units who teach doctrine, allocate funds, and influence systems used to support Army values.

**Projecting National Power Through Relativism**

After reviewing the materials, there is one major difference noted between older and younger generations; how people interact with the concept of truth is changing. Significantly, millennials, Generation X, and Generation Y approach the topic of truth (its application and basis)—known as alethiology—in a consistently shifting manner. The application of fairness, especially as it pertains to social justice, affects ethical behavior in both positive and negative ways. The idea of the equality of all cultures and religions allows for learning sans worldview barriers, accepting novel practices, and easing group integration. However, it has also manifested in entitlement and lowered standards of excellence (questioning even the idea of excellence). Additionally, obedience to authority presents a source of friction between the national values and the military’s current expectation. Unlawful orders already have the provision for required, protected disobedience; the emerging belief is that personal disagreement with an order or policy should be treated the same as demonstrably illicit orders. What will happen to the military as the ideas of truth, fairness, and obedience change?

National power and the relationship outlined in the Constitution necessitate military means translating into national security end states. The military does this by forming strategic goals nested within the elements of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial capability, intelligence capability, legal capability or “DIME-FIL”) model to affect nodes on the adversaries’ operational variables (political, military, economic, intelligence, information operations, physical terrain, time or PMESII-II capabilities). One of the commander’s roles is to create teams that align the ways and means of the force with the ends required. Team leaders communicate a vision, rely on trust, and build cohesion to the mission. Trust and cohesion require transparency, time, and a strong ethical stance. While leading by example, the transparent leader shows their work ethic, values, and expectations. The Army’s Command General Staff Officer

College strongly supports the Kotter model for leading change.<sup>14</sup> Hence, the key leaders identified are the coalition for driving change, in accordance with the Kotter model and chief of staff of the Army (CSA) vision.

Trust is essential to team-building, and the generational studies cited above show that Generations X, Y, and Z are increasingly concerned with trust. Truth is critical to trust because it forms the basis of common belief and gives an objective stance from which to judge experiences and predict outcomes. Values-based leadership is the Army model, which relies on truth as a concept. Contrarily, Generations Y and Z operate by understanding that truth is a social construct which is personal, situational, and unverifiable. Contemporary phrases like “that may be true for you, but...” exemplify personal truth, while statements like “that only is true in the suburbs, but here in the city...” indicate situational truth. Contemporary questions like “how can anyone know x, y, or z?” demonstrate unverifiable truth.

Using truth in this way degrades the concept, perverts the application, and does not fit with military ideology. However, the person conversant in this method of thought can be used by the military leader. An aspect of treating truth as a social construct is relativistic thinking—especially in respect to truth, fairness, and social justice—which reduces bias when studying cultures or interpreting intelligence. Belief that all cultures and faiths are equal prevents American exceptionalism and support of unchecked hegemony.

Measured against millennial or net generational beliefs that support universal entitlement, truth fundamentally challenges the concept of self. As part of understanding the self, categories of values as an American, as a citizen, as a military member, as an officer, et cetera commence the process of inclusion, which begin the team-building process. Generations Y and Z, via relativistic philosophy, have come to the belief that all answers are valid and useful; therefore, all work is progress. This makes any participation worthy of reward, and a reward must be equal, regardless of perceived value to the organization or boss (because perception is limited to the individual). Though the military does support limited entitlement, generally it molds the individual into compliance. Placing these concepts together allows for universal non-discrimination where all forms of everything are equal (positive) and participation is the necessity, not excellence (negative). The leader must accentuate the positive while making the minimum acceptable to serve the needs of the mission and commander. Standards, laws, regulations, and policies create the framework to influence the group and mitigate interpersonal friction.

Though the research does not conclusively prove that personal values override authority directives, all sources agree that personal values are increasingly important. Considering that choice predicates conformance and agreement predicates compliance, it follows that teambuilding requires influence. There is nothing more influential than the truth. However, relativism allows each person to operate under a self-directed concept and application of truth. An aspect of this is the potential for disagreement requiring disobedience. The millennial or net generation cohort is more likely to take a position (be true to themselves) based on personal belief, which they equate to truthfulness. When values and beliefs collide, Generation Z creates interpersonal friction. Agreement prevents friction, and rules, laws, and policies are concrete. Mutual belief is imperative to congruence, and having an absolute definition of truth (or at least shared values) fosters similar understanding. Application of truth as a concept which is real, knowable, and external to the person prevents dissent and fiction.

### **Stakeholder Analysis**

Generations interact with the Army values model differently. The chief of chaplains and brigade commanders have different perspectives on what is important and why. Additionally, people assign importance and worth of concepts based on opinion, worldview, and occupation. For example, chaplains may focus on integrity as being most important, while the brigade commander desires duty as the top value.

While learning about generational theory and considering its implications, the primary goal of matching all Army personnel to the LDRSHIP values became paramount. Since all personnel in the Army entered understanding certain laws, values, and principles are imposed upon them, universal application of the Army values does not undervalue individuals or eliminate corporate congruency. As the people who are making the decisions are changing, so too will the interpretations of data and standards of implementation.

Generation X interacts with loyalty as a risk. Generation X believes in the concept but has major mistrust and needs continual reassurance. Generation X well understands and expects duty, having volunteered to the military in a time of war and serve knowing that they can be called upon to give their life (and freedoms) to protect the Constitution. Respect is not a natural fit for Generation X since they have a situational understanding of truth and have seen many leaders fail over their life span. Generation X relates to self-less service in a completely situational manner and is very given to large acts, but lament small ones. Since Generation X prefers time, space, and order to best perform, they do not always work well with others. Self-less service requires giving up little things as much as big, so it is one area of ire in this population. This cohort is the last to interpret, expect, and use honor in a traditional way. Generation X interacts with integrity in surprising and hypocritical ways. Generation X has a high expectation of it in officials, but does not address it in themselves. Ultimately, Generation X has difficulty with integrity because they do not define it as something concrete or external to the agent. Generation X is quite willing to exercise personal courage to achieve a goal, right a wrong, or to better themselves.

Bottom line: Generation X behavior can be transformed through rigid application of fair rules, consistent and frequent feedback, and demonstration of a higher purpose for actions (seeing the big picture). Chaplains provide the brigade commanders with feedback on observations within the unit, equip Generation X with communication and conflict-resolution skills, and establish low-risk avenues to elevate ideas and gripes to commanders (empowering the person). Brigade commanders provide vision to link individual actions to the strategic level, manage interpersonal conflicts quickly and fairly, and avidly work to deserve trust and loyalty rather than expect it.

Generation Y is very willing to give loyalty and expects it until circumstances or actions dictate otherwise. They are the most dutiful of the cohorts explored here. They respect concepts rather than people, but can come close to adulation in some circumstances (someone they see as an idol or above all others). This is because they grew up in a culture where fame is more important than character. Generation Y gives and expects respect from all, to all. Generation Y holds each person equally and does not think it is inappropriate to demand a superior to show them respect in kind. Generation Y is prone to linking respect to loyalty; if a leader loses respect they feel entitled to reduce their loyalty and duty. Self-less service is not foreign to them but this cohort links it to altruistic ideas and viewpoints rather than to a system or position of authority. Generation Y understands honor in a relativistic, situational manner. Generation Y conflates it with integrity and does not interpret it with personal prestige according to American Army culture. Generation Y interprets integrity as a corporate need rather than a personal one. Relativism allows situational ethics and groups of peers are expected to draft and enforce rules as a society of peers. Generation Y displays personal courage in many ways. This cohort will use resources to better themselves and are keenly interested in making better environments and societies. Generation Y interprets overcoming social obstacles as being tantamount to the highest forms of courage displayed on the battlefield and they are very interested in social justice.

Bottom line: Generation Y behavior can be transformed through accessing, participating with, and guiding teams. Chaplains have experience in small group leadership, assessing moral climates, and influencing groups through strategic messaging. Brigade commanders approach leading groups from the Kotter model, and use the “guiding coalition” to express vision, make changes, and enable Soldiers by removing barriers.<sup>15</sup> Both chaplains and commanders approach homogeneity by grounding divisive ideology in regulation, facts, and group norms.

Generation Z approaches loyalty in terms of self and are the most likely to experience significant friction with this concept. Generation Z is not inherently disloyal, but they have been taught to put self first and group loyalty second. Millennials approach duty as an agreement between parties and expect both sides hold to stated or expected roles and requirements. Respect is earned, multilateral, and non-hierarchical to Generation Z. They will expect equal return to that which is given from all parties. This stems from a high regard for fairness and hyper-relativism, which makes all people equal regardless of position, age, or experience. Millennials show high regard for self-less service. Indeed, Generation Z desires to make a difference in their environment and are altruistic. Generation Z has a varied relationship to honor. They view honor negatively when it leads to violence or assertion of a single viewpoint, and regard it highly when applied to upholding cultural norms. Generation Z most highly values integrity, but self is placed above others. This manifestation of integrity can be hypocritical, and it will be applied unfairly, based on perceived need or warrant derived from experience or philosophical viewpoint. Ultimately, this is the best and worst generational match for the LDRSHIP values.

Transforming a hyper-relativistic, sub-clinical narcissistic culture into the Army definition of integrity requires consistent, directed application of effort to inculcate. Millennials use the concept of personal courage individually and corporately. Having grown up in a more diverse social environment than previous generations, identity is one of the biggest topics. Hence, millennials are unable to define self and struggle to act in meaningful ways to illustrate selflessness. Generation Z will experience conflicts between personal courage based on interpretations of self-integrity and duty. Millennials may conflate personal courage with duty, as in they have a duty to be true to self and disobey orders. Generation Z will not see this as disorderly because they are able to place both these ideas together without friction in their mind, using justification and caveat. In addition, since each person is both an agent and someone who merely reacts to stimuli, millennials may create a “group-self” responsible for certain roles. An example would be a work-self being compartmental from family-self and separate from weekend-self. Millennials will expect superiors to support and respect their boundaries and efforts.

To understand where specific generation groups relate to each Army value, I developed a metric of values mapping. The Y axis of the map relates how much the cohort associates a value with authority or seniority. The X axis relates how much the cohort connects a value with personal choice or agency. The overall goal is to create a visual representation of convergence and divergence involving each Army Value. (See Figure 1 on page 43.)

### **What Does this Mean for the Future Leader?**

As a prerequisite to military service, each person in the Army has sworn to uphold the U.S. Constitution and follow the orders of those appointed over them. The Army values offer an ethical base that is devoid of religious or cultural connotations; this makes it an ideal framework for establishing group ethics. The Army values are not legally binding or regulatory; however, they can be enforced by the positional authority of brigade commanders. A shared values system such as the Army values fosters trust among service members. Trust is a key component to maximizing the best generational behaviors while avoiding generational pitfalls.

Shared values create teams, and all generations in the military are united in a firm desire to accomplish missions. Each generation brings strengths and barriers which must be understood to optimize unit effectiveness and cohesion. Generations Y and Z will form groups that can teach themselves quickly, accept anything new (operations, cultures, et cetera), are very good at thinking creatively, and are willing to experiment. Generation Z will constantly question authority and have a strong need to create personal power and relationship networks.

Generations Y and Z approach learning and reasoning through the paradigm of relativism. Generations Y and Z apply relativism in a way that removes prejudices that can prevent accurate and adequate

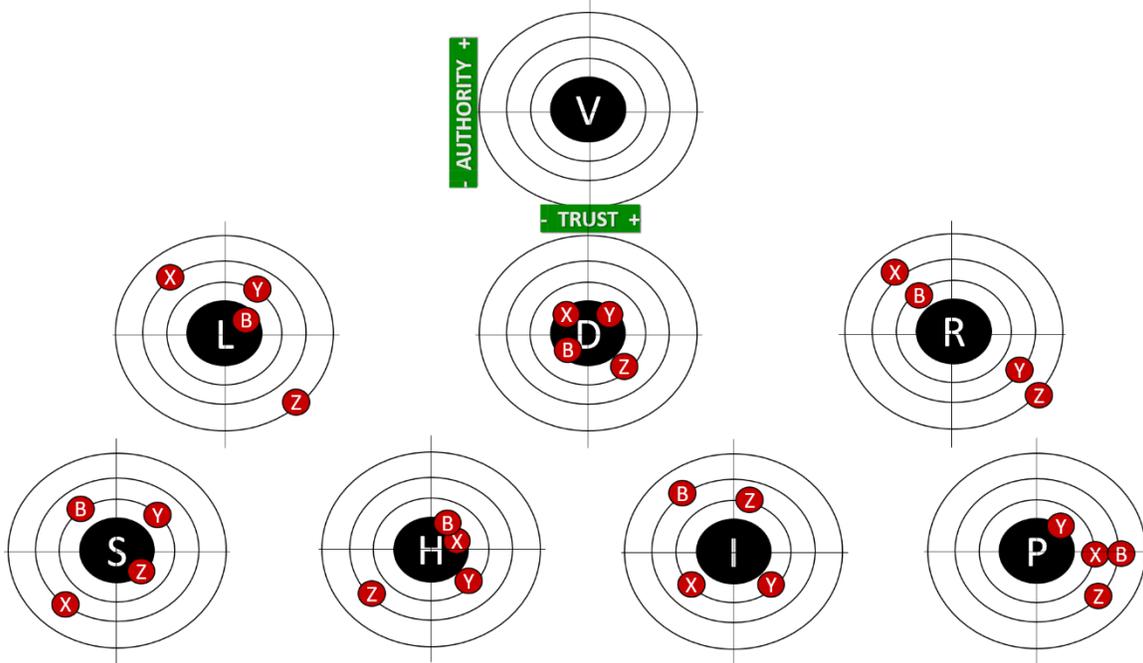


Figure 1. Army Values Mapping Model

understanding of concepts. They have learned the skill of an unbiased approach through interpersonal interaction from an uninformed position. The millennials, especially, have been taught to begin a conversation by gaining an understanding of the other person's point of view, beliefs, and preferences. Operating under this paradigm of relativism, there is an increased capacity to learn other cultures, allow group consensus to have increased value. Mindful that values such like honesty, integrity, and honor are treated as ambiguous or situational, relativistic philosophy allows flexibility in action and thought. This relativistic focus on justice and the person fosters rapid norming to environments, strong belief in personal capability, and an ardent desire to understand other cultures or ideologies. Negatively, relativism leads to poor moorings when confronted with contradictory information. This may result in disillusionment or anger, followed by pragmatism. Relativism limits duty, integrity, and responsibility to those activities and persons which yield direct and personal benefit.

In terms of creating a cohesive team, relativism requires a strong initial mental investment for projects. Expect even the most junior member's willingness to question terms or ideas to clarify understanding directly and frequently. There are pitfalls to relativism as well. Since truth in this model is so personal, it fosters strong responses when challenged. Rebelliousness is conflated with personal courage, which conflicts with loyalty, duty, and respect. Individuals expect rewards when any effort is produced because they believe incentives should be based on the person rather than objective standards or team achievements.

## Endnotes

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