Captain Miller or Major Powers? Developing the Proper Ethical Culture for Large Scale Combat Operations

William J. Davis, Jr. and Mark Kormos

Disciplined disobedience to achieve the higher purpose, if you do that,
then you're the guy who's going to get the pat on the back.

—General Mark Milley[1]

An important question for the U.S. Army to ask as an organization is "what kind of culture should be built in order to succeed in 21st century LSCO?" There will be those who will consider discipline to be the cornerstone of any Army and will long for the days of close order drill. Others will posit that adaptability and flexibility in an ambiguous environment will be the key to success and wonder about how to create that culture. Consider the following scenario, the day after 9/11 a commander walked into the building he had been going to for three years, and was challenged to present his identification by a sergeant who had worked in the same office. When the commander said that the sergeant knew him and that the commander should not have to show an identification, the sergeant replied that he was told that there would be no exceptions. My question to the person about to read this paper is—do you want that sergeant with you when fighting in the future?

For years, the Army juxtaposed Massengill and Damon, characters from *Once an Eagle* to inspire its officers to become great leaders of character. However, for General Milley's words to become a shared value in the Army during Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) a different juxtaposition will be required—that of Major Powers, a character from the movie *Heartbreak Ridge* who chews out junior officers for not following his orders to exact precision, versus Captain Miller from the movie *Saving Private Ryan* who not only deviates and acts on intent throughout the movie to save private Ryan, but does this within the larger strategic context of winning the war.

Much has been argued about whether the spirit of mission command as embodied in the above quote could ever become a shared value in today's Army.[2] Although the Army tried to incorporate mission command and its elements as a warfighting function and philosophy in its doctrine and teachings[3], anecdotally the mention of mission command when spoken about in the context of being a value-in-use vice only an espoused value garners snickers from all but the most senior officers, and most recently, it even garners significant skepticism from them.[4] While General Milley has taken the lead, there is considerable bureaucratic and organizational resistance to change that may never be overcome in order to meet the spirit of his quote. Concurrently, the Army has also begun to focus its entire organizational competency on being successful in Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO). It has changed its doctrine, its schoolhouse curricula, and its training focus to developing competency in LSCO.[5] However, what the Army has not addressed sufficiently is the ethical values that need to be developed in order to be successful in LSCO beyond the technical rationality of synergistically applying the warfighting functions. War is a complex system that requires constant adaptation by individuals in the face of ambiguity, volatility, uncertainty, and extreme conditions,

and that adaptability requires a strong ethical foundation. The purpose of this paper is to identify three components of the Army's organizational culture that will ensure Milley's vision is achieved. First, it will identify values-in-use of the Army that will act as a hindrance. Second, it will identify values-in-use that will act as a catalyst. Finally, it will provide recommended policy and regulation changes that will ensure disciplined disobedience becomes a value-in-use for the Army during LSCO.

Framework

The importance of culture is an essential and critical element in analyzing the performance of any organization. Among the most respected publications in the field of cultural studies are those written by Edgar Schein. He developed a model that explains the concept of culture and the way it affects organizations. He defines culture as:

> …a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.[6]

The authors' purpose in writing this paper is to determine the extent to which the culture of the U.S. Army will embrace or eschew disciplined disobedience and to then make recommendations to policy and regulations that will enhance the ethical underpinnings necessary to successfully enhance the mission command environment. Schein's model provides a valid framework to assess the deep underlying assumptions and shared values which are the catalyst for behaviors. His theory posits that an organizational culture consists of three distinct levels: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions.

It has been determined that the underlying beliefs, values and assumptions of a culture (the third and most complex level according to Schein) will provide the best insight as to behavior within an organization.[7] For the sake of parsimony, the authors will only identify Schein's third level values as either inhibitors or catalysts for the ethical underpinnings of achieving General Milley's vision. However, it is important to note that often the investigation of first and second level indicators lead to third level values. For example, Schein advances that individuals embrace values and adapt to norms because their underlying assumptions encourage and reinforce the norms. These norms and values inspire events that produce observable artifacts. As an example, a college may espouse that it is student-centric and that the professors are always there to help the students. However, students may embrace a basic underlying assumption that "the only time I see my professors is during class." This outward angst in defiance of what an organization believes to be a value oftentimes can be adjudicated through the investigation of the second and first levels of a culture. An example of an artifact (level I) could be a sign placed on all professors' office doors stating office hours, email addresses and contact phone numbers that would support the organizational norm that professors are indeed available outside of class.[8]

Basic underlying assumptions are the deepest and third level of culture in Schein's theory. These elements are profoundly embedded and unconscious norms that are shared and been accepted by the group. They tend to be taken for granted and extremely difficult to change. Any challenge to these assumptions will result in distress and anxiety for the organization's leaders. In fact, if a group strongly accepts an assumption, individuals will have a shared belief that any behavior based on any other basis unimaginable.[9] For instance, if an individual is a member of the Armed Forces it is inconceivable to believe that they would not be patriotic. The authors intend to focus on those underlying assumptions which are catalysts and inhibitors of a mission command environment.

Inhibitors

The Army is the largest (numbers-wise) of all of the Services, and as such, it tends to have more rules, regulations and adherence to the hierarchy than the other Services (an exception to this within the Army would be the Special Forces). Hence, an Army officer has been integrated into a very hierarchical system that thrives on detailed planning and plans, and support of the hierarchy. For example, it is quite a common knowledge that the Army does not do anything without an operations order, which is a detailed tasking of what each element has to do.[10] However, it is not just the Army which has the organizational challenge of developing members who exhibit deviant leadership traits and everyday courage. In a Harvard Business Review article titled Cultivating Everyday Courage in December of 2018, Detert noted that professionals who courageously go against the accepted norms within their organization risk personal ostracization and professional isolation.[11]

In an article in 2008, Gerras et al. identified a number of shared cultural values that inhibited independent performance in a counterinsurgency conflict. They determined that lack of assertiveness within the hierarchy, in-group collectivism, institutional collectivism, performance orientation and power distance were all values that stressed adhering to the organizational hierarchy and promoted not deviating from accepted norms.[12] The authors have identified a few more. Of important note is that some of the inhibitors are in direct contradiction to the catalysts. This kind of "values-in-use" versus "espoused values" dynamic is well documented in theory and will produce inefficiency and friction in an organization where it amply exists.[13] However, in an organization the size of the U.S. Army, it can be expected to exist to some extent.

The Ultimate Responsibility of the Commander

Although mission command and its element of disciplined initiative can be an excellent tool for dealing with the complexity on the 21st Century modern battlefield in LSCO, there are inherent risks that cause many individuals to reject it. A key organizational inhibitor to the concept of disciplined initiative is that Commanders often mistrust subordinates because they may make errors. Within the organizational structure of the military, and the authors argue a cultural expectation that is the key value that separates the military from most other organizations, is the value of the "ultimate responsibility of the commander." Most times in the military, if an organization fails at a mission, it is the commander who bears the brunt of the responsibility of the failure regardless of the true cause.

Mutual trust between a superior and a subordinate is critical in any endeavor. Establishing trust is done over time and it must be deservingly earned.[14] Leaders must trust in the aptitudes and talents of their subordinates and their people must trust in the abilities and experience of their leaders. The problem is some leaders lack courage, allow fear to become the dominant emotion, and believe empowering followers can go terribly wrong. Many leaders have a vision for the outcomes they expect and are unwilling to deviate from that vision, falsely linking outcomes to "the way the leader would have done it." Leaders then lose patience and trust when undesirable outcomes occur because they interpret the outcomes as the result of an individual or team's lack of preparation, foresight or desire to complete desired tasks, instead of on the unpredictability of complexity. "I envisioned a better outcome, and if only you did it my way, that outcome would have occurred," becomes the base from which to lead. In addition, with the advent of a near-zero defect Army,[15] a commander's future career may rest upon not having things go wrong at any time.

In addition, the manner in which leaders are inculcated to the ultimate responsibility of a commander is problematic. For example, a platoon or company commander may be able to exercise span of control over most things, but a brigade commander will not. However, the only heuristic the brigade or battalion commander will have is direct control. Learning an entirely new leadership style is disconcerting after 15 or more years of acting within a particular construct. This is a significant inhibitor to the ethic of disciplined initiative.

Focus on Mission Accomplishment

Above all else, the Army values mission accomplishment. In order to avoid the apprehension and worry some leaders encounter when they are not in direct control of the mission, they will tend to micromanage the efforts of their subordinates, thereby creating a culture of obedience vice initiative. In addition, the supervisors of leaders often are more concerned with accomplishing the mission rather than mentoring, coaching, and professionally developing subordinates. Delegating tasks is essential since it allows leaders to focus on other priorities such as planning, resourcing, and organizing. The problem for leaders in an organization that values mission accomplishment above all else is that there is always risk associated with relying on someone else as the key mechanism that determines mission success, especially when that someone else is a person that they could not personally choose. They have little, if any control over personnel assigned to their organization and new employees may not have the proper skill sets or work ethic to accomplish critical missions. This provides a great deal of friction when applied to the vision of General Milley.

Equity in the Personnel System

Aside from certain elite units, a U.S. Army commander has little input on the make-up of his or her unit. While some commanders get to select a few key personnel, the majority of any team will be ad hoc. Assuming that to provide subordinates with enough leeway to exercise disciplined initiative requires trust, if a commander were able to select team composition, then that trust would be accelerated. A belief that all members of the organization of a certain rank and specialty have achieved a baseline standard that will allow for adequate performance on the complex battlefield is naïve.[16] Without the ability to hire a team based on his or her own standards, a commander will be inhibited from allowing the members of the team enough freedom for independent action until such time they have proven that they can perform.

Catalysts

Commitment to Developing Leaders

Creating strong leaders who display the attributes and competencies to lead as described in Army doctrine is a primary catalyst for creating adaptable leaders with disciplined initiative. The Army espouses leader development as the cornerstone of its foundation. While the authors were determined to identify level three shared values, experience with the leader development aspect of the Army is conflicting. While all Army documents fully espouse leader development, recent incidents concerning toxic leaders within the ranks brings to question just how well the Army accomplishes the task of leader development. However, the toxic leader perturbations appear to be more the result of combining a key catalyst with a key inhibitor (commitment to mission accomplishment). One cannot doubt the Army's commitment to developing leaders, hence it is noted as a catalyst to achieving General Milley's vision.

Commitment to a Learning Organization

Creating a learning organization is about open communication and team member engagement. Peter Senge, who described learning organizations in his book *The Fifth Discipline,* described them as places "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together."[17] While the Army does not appear to fit the definition completely, it does have processes in place to facilitate the aspects of a learning organization—after action reviews, an abundance of educational courses, and climate surveys. The Army also uses the schoolhouse has a means to educate the force and assist in expediting new cultural norms. A primary example is the pace at which the Army transitioned to a counter-insurgency capable force once the determination to make such a transition was made.

Recommended Changes

One of the authors asked General Milley directly which policy or regulation changes he might propose in order to make his quote a reality. General Milley said no policy or regulation changes were necessary, that the Army would adopt the philosophy within the construct of mission command.[18] We hate to disappoint General Milley, but it is unlikely that the culture of disciplined disobedience will be adopted without significant statutory or policy backing. The elephant in the room is that barring some cataclysmic event or outside pressure, the culture of the Army will not fully adopt the value of disciplined initiative required for success in LSCO, because the inhibitors identified above are deeply embedded not only in culture but in regulation and policy. There are many instances of leaders who tried to change the culture of their military organizations that sit upon the trash heap of failure. Changes as simple as a conversion to different headgear in the Army in order to develop more pride and an expeditionary outlook[19] to a more gender-neutral nomenclature in the Navy,[20] have failed miserably. However, as Schein posits, when cultural changes have been directly linked to a reward system within the organization, the culture will begin to change.[21] The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, which is the main reason that the military Services can synergistically apply their power across the Services, is a primary example of this. The Goldwater-Nichols Act requires that officers have joint education and experience in order to be promoted (rewarded), and thus, operating in a joint manner has become a de facto value among most military officers today. It is the contention of the officers, that in order to overcome the significant friction obstructing the full acceptance of the ethic of disciplined initiative, that regulation and policy changes must accompany any goal. Adhering to the phenomenon that cultures will not change without some sort of forcing mechanism, we recommend the following changes:

1. That Army Command Policy, doctrine manual 600-20, be amended to support the use of disciplined initiative.[22] This change would specifically change paragraph 4-1 subsection c to read "Commanders and other leaders will maintain discipline according to the policies of this chapter, applicable laws and regulations, and *the intent of* the orders of seniors." This change adds the italicized portion.

2. The second change to 600-20 would be under 4-2 Obedience to Orders. It currently states that "All persons in the military Service are required to strictly obey and promptly execute the legal orders of their lawful seniors." The suggested change would be "All persons in the military Service are required to obey and promptly execute the legal orders of their lawful seniors *within the provided intent*." (Emphasis added.)

3. Change the Manual for Courts-Martial United States elements of the crime for article 90—Willful disobedience of a lawful order. This would involve changing the key element of the crime from "That the accused willfully disobeyed the lawful command," to "That the accused willfully disobeyed *the intent* of the lawful command."[23]

4. The Army must apply Outcomes-Based Training and Education for all Army schools. The principle behind this educational endeavor is focusing on outcomes while subordinates choose the best methods to achieve those outcomes.[24] The emphasis is enthusiastically engaging in problem solving and learning so that leaders and Soldiers can make timely decisions to wicked problems under severe stress and uncertainty. To be effective, there must be a shift from teaching doctrinally approved solutions to one that provides core skills and develops proficiency in critical thinking and problem solving, particularly at the lowest levels.[25] On the modern battlefield, the junior officer or noncommissioned officer on site may have the best situational awareness and is more likely to make the most informed decision. This can only take place if he or she contains the intellect and cultural awareness to properly assess the environment and apply critical and creative thinking to effectively solve problems.

Conclusion

The U.S. Army has gone "all in" on LSCO. In addition, from the Chief of Staff of the Army down to lowest soldier, there is recognition that during LSCO, disciplined initiative even to the point of disciplined disobedience will be required to win the war. What we have offered is that just as it took legislation to make the Department of Defense a Joint Force, it will take more than cheap talk to inculcate the value of disciplined disobedience into the Army. The Army must "put its money where its mouth is" and begin to adopt the policy and regulations that will become the catalyst for cultural change.

End Notes

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