

Generation “WHY”

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“What is wrong with Soldiers these days?” “How can leaders understand and deal with Generation Y?” These are questions heard on a regular basis. Thousands of articles are available attempting to answer these questions about Millennials, the more common name for Generation Y, and countless more will come. The real issue facing senior NCOs in the Army today is that there is nothing wrong with Millennials. In fact, we can learn a lot from these young Soldiers. Every generation of Soldiers face the same two dilemmas. Dilemma One: A Soldier enters the Army and over time realizes know he/she has the ability to be better than the current leadership. Dilemma Two: As a Soldier moves up in rank and become a leader, he/she predicts the next generation could potentially ruin everything they worked so hard to create. The first paradigm is always true, which by default makes the second one always false.

Much like every generation before them, Millennials are different than their predecessors. The way they communicate, socialize, interact with fellow Soldiers, and even the way they develop both personally and professionally, are all very different than the Generation X. Most profoundly different though is the way Millennials respond to leadership. The Millennial Soldier desires to know the reason why they are told to do something. By demanding to know “why”, Millennials are quite possibly the first generation that will do what no generation before them has ever done. Millennial Soldiers will make the previous generation better.

Modern Leadership Theory

Most leadership theory taught today, especially at senior levels, revolves around servant leadership, the importance of personal and referent power, the use of soft influences, and values based subordinate buy-in through shared vision. These teachings all have one thing in common. They require the explanation and understanding of “why” by both the led and the leader. “Why”

describes the purpose not just the task. Understanding the purpose leads to commitment. Greenleaf (1977) in his original description of a servant leader asks, “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous” (p. 6)? Sharing why things need to get done enables growth to answer yes to those questions. The Army (2012) explicitly states in ADRP 6-22, “Clearly communicate the future vision to be embraced by all members” (p.11-3). The Millennials, along with the Army, are merely expecting leaders to provide information coupled with the reason “why.” Therefore, once NCOs consistently explain the reason behind a directive and communicate the “why,” trust can develop between them and the leader can be influential.

Trust: The Bedrock of the Army Profession

Army doctrine identifies trust as the key component to both leadership and the profession of arms. Mutual understanding among Soldiers and leaders builds trust. Soldiers want to trust that their leaders are putting the best interests of the team ahead of themselves. Leaders want to trust their Soldiers will perform their assigned tasks for the good of the team as well. NCOs often mistakenly perceive Soldiers who ask “why” as questioning the leader or even being insubordinate. In reality, Soldiers are simply questioning the status-quo and pushing the organization forward. NCOs with self-efficacy are aware of this phenomenon, and have already reflected and questioned themselves. Blind followers are not what the Army wants or needs. Therefore, shouldn’t an organization embrace this kind of questioning as a means of growing and becoming a more effective organization? Leaders should, whenever possible, provide the “why” prior to being asked. This ultimately establishes the mutual trust. Sinek (2009) explains it best:

You have to earn trust by communicating and demonstrating that you share the same values and beliefs. You have to talk about your WHY and prove it with WHAT you do.

...Those who lead are able to do so because those who follow trust that the decisions made at the top have the best interest of the group at heart. In turn, those who trust work hard because they feel like they are working for something bigger than themselves. (p. 93)

Trust fosters a healthy organizational culture. Trust enables mission command. Trust builds strong highly proficient teams. Trust is the foundation of excellence.

Conclusion

This next generation of Soldiers who joined the ranks of the Army in the past decade are the future of the force. Much like the Baby Boomers did for Generation X, leaders are charged with the responsibility to teach, coach, and mentor their replacements. What can and should be done differently this time is rather simple. Leaders today need to learn from Millennials. They should give in to the demand of answering the question “why.” In fact, they should do more than just give in. They should embrace and encourage it. They should make it a habit to explain why tasks are being done a certain way. They should explain why the commander’s intent is what it is. They should take the time to tell Soldiers why traditions are important. They should explicitly describe why decisions are made after every training event. They should describe why as much as possible. When leaders explain “why” not only do Soldiers learn the purpose of what they are doing, but they themselves gain a better understanding of it as well. The current blend of Generation X and Generation Y has the opportunity to become the greatest combination of Soldiers in the history of the United States. If you are wondering how, don’t. Instead just ask “WHY.”

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