

Eliminating Garrison Mentality from Command Climates

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In 2015, military cutbacks dominated news headlines with lower numbers of troops, mass lay-offs for civilian employees, and concerns that an Army cut to the bone was spread too thin to be effective. These cutbacks also created a far more insidious concern, one discussed rarely in the press but frequently between Soldiers. The Army's shift from a well-resourced, combat-focused force to an underfunded garrison force reduced the warrior ethos to a petty bureaucracy. Despite the Mission Command concept's introduction in 2012, many brigade and division commanders relegated the idea of "enable disciplined initiative ... to empower agile and adaptive leaders" (ADP 6-0, 2012, p. 1), to a field mentality, and replaced it with excessively detailed briefings, micro-managed operation orders and a 'never say no' expectation. The common vernacular for this style of leadership is 'garrison mentality,' and it is lethal to wartime readiness, morale, and leader development. The goal of this paper is to define and explain the garrison mentality thoroughly by addressing its root causes and appeal, the impact this mindset has on unit readiness and command climates, and the recommendation to solve the issue through the ethical lenses of rules, outcomes, and virtues. In terms of military leadership, garrison mentality is a clear and present danger that must be addressed at all organizational levels.

Root Cause

Garrison mentality is a condition in which leaders succumb to external pressures with excessive bureaucracy and micromanagement techniques, focusing on details and discipline instead of leader development and unit readiness. In contrast, leaders with a field mentality focus on accomplishing goals and building skills, relying on subordinate leaders to make decisions that will seize the initiative. Garrison mentality leaders explain exactly what to do for any given task and evaluate by measures of performance; field mentality leaders describe the

desired end state and evaluate by measures of effectiveness. Proximity is a significant factor in which style a leader will choose to adopt: the tyranny of distance forces trust whereas familiarity breeds contempt. The 10th Mountain Division is an excellent example of proximity's influence. When responsible for Afghanistan's Regional Command – East, the division covered 89,000 square kilometers; the vast distances between units forced commanders to trust subordinate leaders. In the garrison environment of Fort Drum, however, 10th Mountain Division covers less than 65 square-kilometers, and a brigade commander can see mistakes four steps down the chain of command just by looking out his or her window. Additional scrutiny is unavoidable, and supported by a military paradigm that the standard one walks past is the standard one accepts, encouraging senior leaders to make on-the-spot corrections.

A risk averse command climate also promotes the garrison mentality in subordinate leadership by requiring additional paperwork. “Risk-taking is systematically extinguished by layers of rules, restrictions and micromanagement aimed at avoiding any possible shortcomings” (Barno, 2014, para. 11). Safety pledges, travel reports, vehicle inspections, risk assessments, recall rosters, accountability formations, storyboards, and excessive planning sessions all provide physical proof that leaders and subordinates alike are meeting their basic responsibilities – and clearly illustrate there is no trust in junior leadership. When incidents happen in risk averse organizations, leaders instinctively place greater priority on defending their position or finding someone to blame rather than identifying the actual cause; the inevitable solution to preventing future incidents becomes additional bureaucratic measures that overburden subordinates.

The final cause of garrison mentality is simply a lack of experience with any alternatives. “Training and preparation for war will take the place of actually waging it” (Barno, 2014, para. 12). Rather than leading troops in combat conditions, peacetime leaders instead focus on the

intricacies of training management, briefings, and completing online training requirements. They spend more time on reporting readiness across multiple systems than actually trying to improve readiness. Without risk of death, failure becomes the largest hazard, and a senior commander may judge failure just as harshly as a fatality. Without missions to plan, senior leaders focus on creating training requirements for subordinate units. Tragically, these peacetime procedures crush the very leadership attributes combat leaders need to be successful, and the impact of garrison mentality does not end there.

Impact

G.W. Yeakey (2002) identifies five predictors for successful combat leadership: first-level experience, time in the unit, relationships with the unit, job knowledge, and confidence. Senior leaders with a garrison mentality destroy four of these predictors, leaving only time in the unit unscathed. As mentioned earlier, the first-level experience a young leader gains through garrison mentality is mostly administrative with little wartime application – even though being ready for war is the Army’s first priority. Second, it taints the senior commander’s relationships with those in his or her command by forcing junior leaders to pre-emptively gain approval for decisions rather than accept prudent risk. Leaders with a garrison mentality “value bureaucratic process and compliance above all else” (Barno, 2014, para. 11). Garrison mentality does not simply teach young leaders to be risk averse, it eliminates the possibility of taking risks from their repertoire. This strict focus on bureaucracy limits their job knowledge by taking time from battle tasks. Captain Wolfgang Lueth, one of Germany's leading World War II submarine aces, told German naval cadets: “Your crews won't care if you are a perfect fat head, as long as you sink ships” (cited in Cohen, 1999, para. 33). Applied inversely, Lueth’s insight suggests a lack of combat experience damages relationships within the unit by taking away the Soldiers’ faith in

their leaders. Perhaps the most sinister impact of garrison mentality is this damage to morale, motivation, and confidence. J.M. Spiszer (1999) defines a leader's role in all three of these conditions as mitigating the impact of the environment by identifying what he or she can influence and focusing on those factors to the benefit of his or her Soldiers. It is easy to imagine the damage when senior leaders remove a junior leader's ability to influence any aspect of the environment at all. Micromanagement prevents critical and creative thinking, promotes compliance over commitment, and ultimately drives the best wartime leaders out of the Army while demoralizing those who stay (Barno, 2014). The truly detestable element of garrison mentality is that Army Doctrine published the solution five years ago, but the condition persists.

Recommendation

Rules Lens

To develop young leaders into confident, flexible, decision-making, battle-ready leaders, they must be empowered to set their own priorities, make their own choices, and live with the consequences. Looking through the rules lens, allowing leaders to make their own decisions is a doctrinally accepted option. Army Doctrine Publication 6-0 (2012, p. 1) defines mission command as, "The exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations." It further lists "disciplined initiative" as a guiding principle; however, discipline means an adherence to a rule or code of conduct, whereas initiative means the power to act independently. The two terms seem as distinctly at odds as field and garrison mentalities. If the mission orders are a set of limits rather than a specifically detailed action though, it allows a junior leader to use initiative within those limits to create a

plan that will accomplish the mission. When mission orders are so precise that they do not allow for any variance, however, then the senior commander is in conflict with ADP 6-0.

Outcomes Lens

Solving the problem of garrison mentality requires more than adherence to doctrine; it requires a commitment to make units into double-loop learning environments. Looking through the outcomes lens, developing leaders for battlefield conditions by allowing them to make decisions creates a better learning environment. While on-the-spot corrections are the right of every Soldier with general authority, senior leaders can have an exponential effect by tracking down the individual's chain of command and asking junior leaders how they will improve standards in their unit. This allows senior leaders to educate junior leaders about military standards, and allows junior leaders the chance to enforce those same standards. T.O. Jacobs (cited in Yeakey, 2002) contended battlefield leaders must understand Army regulations in order to meet challenges, seek alternatives, and produce untried solutions. In other words, leaders cannot think outside the box unless they know what is inside the box; and they cannot discover how to think while being told what to think. Educating leaders by providing constraints and restraints instead of specific options allows junior leaders to choose their own methods to accomplish a task, which allows the organization as a whole to welcome in new ideas and grow. The final step for senior commanders to remove garrison mentality from their units is perhaps the most difficult one – 'no' must become an acceptable answer.

Virtues Lens

Looking through the virtues lens, allowing junior leaders to prioritize assignments, to the point of denying certain tasks, empowers critical thought, creative thinking, freedom and independence – the same tenets the founders used to build the United States of America.

Allowing junior leaders to say ‘no’ poses a risk that some tasks could fail before they even begin, but frequently the demands of policies, regulations, and requirements exceed the time allotted for all assigned tasks anyway. For example, the required annual training obligations in AR 350-1 would take well over a year to complete even if the unit trained 24 hours a day, seven days a week. To develop young leaders into commissioned and non-commissioned officers who are confident in their choices, senior commanders must allow them to make their own decisions and then hold them responsible for the consequences. Junior leaders need to be able to say, ‘no;’ commanders should expect them to say, ‘no’ (Barno, 2014). This is not to say commanders should allow junior leaders to sacrifice discipline or ignore the Uniform Code of Military Justice. It is not saying commanders cannot coach or influence subordinates. When senior commanders take away every decision opportunity though, or make it clear there is only one acceptable choice in a decision, then senior commanders are taking away the virtues of freedom and independence America is built upon. They deny junior leaders an opportunity to gain the experience crucial to good judgment, and produce weak leaders accustomed to tyranny rather than development.

Conclusion

Garrison mentality seduces leaders through proximity to troops, risk averse unit climates, and dwindling levels of battlefield experience in the Army. The ensuing micromanagement and bureaucracy takes the place of first-level experience, ruins relationships within the unit, promotes administrative knowledge over combat performance, and erodes confidence. The solution is a top-down command emphasis on providing constraints and restraints that allow for a variety of innovative options for junior leaders, including not doing the task at all. In effect, this solution recognizes garrison mentality as a clear and present danger to military leadership, and enforces the expectations of ADP 6-0 at all organizational levels.

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