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A Committed Soldier or an Occupationalist

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Abstract

The increasing reliance on monetary inducements to recruit and retain regular service personnel by the Singapore Armed Forces has gives rise to the concern of 'occupationalism' in the military service, as opposed to the traditional view of military as a service to the nation. While this may seem inevitable in the modern society, such value system will undermine the professionalism of any military organization, when taken to the extreme. This paper presents my thoughts on the ethical behaviors and orientations of the committed, obligated and obliging Soldiers (Tay, 2005) in my Armed Forces, and the roles of senior noncommissioned officer to control occupationalism.

A Committed Soldier or an Occupationalist

As Singapore's economy continues to strengthen over the years, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has to compete with the private sector for the human resource to meet its desired manning level. Unsurprisingly, the recruitment and retention level of the SAF is negatively correlated to the state of our economy, that is, higher recruitment during recession and vice versa. Consequently, like many military organizations in the world, SAF rely on monetary inducements and attractive terms of service, including competitive salaries pegged to the 'market rate' and engagement bonuses, to recruit and retain regular service personnel. Personnel policies are also constantly reviewed to react to the recruitment trends. Notably, the SAVER/PREMIUM plans implemented in year 2000, coupled with an accelerated route of advancement scheme for officers, were introduced to attract Singaporean to join the SAF or to serve longer, and have been quite successful.

With the recruitment and retention of regular service personnel seemingly being driven more and more by extrinsic factors, the traditional view of the military as a calling to the nation and national values seem to be giving way to the perception of the military service as an occupation in the labor market, in other words, just another job. Such a trend gives rise to the concern of 'occupationalism' in the military service by many military professionals and scholars because the military profession demands more of a Soldier than any other job in the market place, which cannot always be compensated by extrinsic rewards

While the concern is valid, we have to accept the reality that we are now living in an era of materialism and self-gratification, which ones success is largely measured in monetary terms. The shift of views from a service to the nation to a career that offers material rewards and

individual success, inevitably, represent the general value system of today's society. However, when taken to the extreme - the preoccupation with one's career advancement than duty performance, the placing of self-interests above the interests of the organization, the promotion-oriented instead of service-centered behaviors, such value system will undermine the professionalism of any military organization and seriously hamper the organizational developments.

We also have to agree that monetary remuneration, recognitions and rewards are important, as supported by many motivation theories. On the other hand, the military organization requires certain attitudes and behaviors from its members that can never be made to serve individual interests, at least not in a narrow economic sense. The question, then, is when one enlisted into the military service voluntarily, regardless of whether he viewed it as a calling or just a job, how passionate and committed to the service (and nation) is he, amidst the pursuit of his career advancement; a choice he has made between being a committed Soldier and an occupationalist.

Col. Tay, in his article *On Leaders and Followers – a Personal Reflection*, categorizes followers (and leaders) into committed, obligated and obliging. According to him, the committed follower (and leader) is one who commits himself to a worthy purpose and takes responsibility to pursue it; he is doing what he feels is the best thing to do, in service to the purpose. The 'selfless' obligated follower (and leader), on the other hand, is one who acts out of loyalty to the system(s) and take responsibility to fulfill his obligations to others; he is doing what he thinks is the right thing to do, in service of the obligation. Then there is this 'selfish' obliging follower (and leader) who acts to exploit and take advantage of the system(s) and is obligated only to himself; he is doing what he thinks is in his best interests.

The committed soldier, who dedicates himself to the calling and thus makes a commitment, is the one that every military organization desires to have. The obligated Soldier, who diligently carries out his assigned tasks and responsibilities, is still considered a good Soldier, and can become a committed Soldier if led by committed and inspiring leaders. The obliging Soldier, essentially, is the occupationalist who works for promotions, salary upgrades, benefits and desires to move up to higher ranks or positions as fast as possible without a clear sense of what to do once he has attained it. He may appear to be loyal to and supportive of his leader, only because of a good evaluation report he expects to get from the latter. He may be very keen in taking up SAF-sponsored courses to upgrade himself academically, but with the aim of accelerating his career advancement or, worst, to be better prepared for a job outside the military service. The unrelenting pursuit of monetary gains and promotions may sometimes drive the obliging Soldier to compromise his integrity, at a varying degree, thus leading to ethical problems in the organization. The falsification of reports and documentations by the logistics personnel to cover up discrepancies in administration in order to obtain good results for the annual Logistics Readiness Inspection is a good case in point.

Unfortunately, in our rank-conscious, hierarchically structured environment, it is not difficult to find selfish, obliging Soldiers; some of them have been very successful in their pursuit of self-interests. This is so because very often, we consider a follower who gets the job done or produces a good result as a good follower; regardless if he was selfless or selfish. We are therefore guilty of breeding more selfish, obliging Soldiers, by allowing them to seep through the system. When the obliging Soldiers continue to advance into higher leadership positions, they are likely to destroy commitment, loyalty and trust. They would create dispassionate workplaces

and dishearten the committed and obligated Soldiers. Worst, they may influence and teach others to follow their examples and thus breed more selfish, obliging Soldiers in our organization.

In his book *The Three Meter Zone*, CSM J. D. Pendry, USA (Ret.), borrowed the terms ‘Get All You Can’ and ‘Give All You Can’ to describe leaders who work for the paychecks and those who work for the Army respectively. The obliging leaders with the ‘Get’ mentality, who are more concern about where they live and how they are treated (the perks) than they do about their Soldiers, will destroy the cohesion and esprit de corps of their organization. However, the committed leaders and obligated leaders who practice the ‘Give’ will produce highly motivated and committed teams of Soldier who embrace the Army values.

Fortunately, we do have many committed leaders around us. A 52 years old Signal Warrant Officer with only primary school education, picked up computer programming skills through self-learning on the internet and developed a computer program for a location tracking system that runs on digital radios. His effort not only has resulted in a significant improvement in our operations, but also picked up by the industry for further development. Another Warrant Officer, a technician, who was appointed as the Company Sergeant Major, instead of being satisfied with attending the auxiliary Physical Training Instructor course, enrolled himself on a one-and-a-half year diploma course in fitness and nutrition so that he could also advise his men on diet and nutrition. These are committed leaders, who is willing to sacrifice their own time and spend out-of-pocket money, and through real actions, contribute to organizational effectiveness. They are motivated by a sense of responsibility to the profession.

As senior noncommissioned officers, we must articulate the true meaning of military service and its value system that will cushion the undesirable influence from the private sector. We must inculcate the SAF core values in all our service personnel and set high ethical standards,

but most importantly, we must lead by examples - demonstrate our commitment and live the SAF core values. By our examples, we teach our Soldiers to distinguish between selfishness and selflessness; to pursue individual excellence aggressively but pause occasionally to get their ethical bearings. The rise of occupationalism can and must be checked by fostering an ethical command climate that promotes team spirit and not selfishness; rewards collective efforts and not individual achievement. These are our responsibilities as a committed noncommissioned officer.

References

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