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Favoritism in the Army, the Silent Ethical Dilemma

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Abstract

As Noncommissioned Officers in the United States Army, we are charged with leading Soldiers and developing our units. To do this, we must always ensure that we adhere to the Army values and ethics. If we fail to do this and allow favoritism and partiality to creep into our daily activities with our Soldiers, our Soldiers and units will pay a very high price. We as leaders cannot be fooled into thinking that the incentives and rewards that we want to bestow on our Soldiers will not be seen as favoritism by others, even the perception of partiality from a leader will demoralize a unit and cause distrust from our Soldiers. As leaders, we must always be vigilant in our efforts to ensure fairness for all Soldiers within our ranks.

Favoritism in the Army, the Silent Ethical Dilemma

Favoritism is an everyday occurrence within the Army ranks. In addition, left unchecked may lead to the demoralization of our Soldiers and our units. Favoritism has two key factors, the leader and the subordinate. The leader can be at any level from squad, platoon, company, battalion, and possibly higher. The subordinate is always under the direct supervision of the leader no matter what level. By definition, “favoritism is the showing of special favor, partiality, or the state or fact of being favorite” (Merriam-Webster, 1987, p.453)

As leaders, the Army has charged us with developing well trained Soldiers and units. The Army has given us many tools to accomplish this mission such as Army Regulations, Field Manuals, and the Army values. The Army also states that leaders will treat all Soldiers with respect and fairness, and there will be no separatism within Army units, by doing this we will develop stronger and more competent Soldiers and organizations.

Policies within organizations also cause partiality and favoritism or the perception of it, no matter if it is at company or division level. A policy at unit level that allows Soldiers who score 290 or above on their Army Physical Fitness Test, to conduct physical training on their own. The Army standard for the Army Physical Fitness Test is 180 points, 60 points in each of the three events. What is this policy telling our Soldiers who score between 180 and 289 points on their APFT? It is telling them nothing other than we have just established a new precedent within the unit. We take action against those Soldiers who fail to meet the Army standard and we give rewards to a select group who scored within a certain set of points. That is not fairness as the Army requires, but shows partiality to a select few. I call it a policy for promoting separatism within the unit. As leaders, how can we train and develop a team when we allow things like this to happen within our units.

Favoritism and partiality is even created at Division levels as evident with the 101st Airborne Division (AASLT). In the 101st, you have to be Air Assault qualified to attend any of the NCO or Soldier boards conducted at Division level. The Battalion and Brigade boards encourage Soldiers whether they are Air Assault qualified or not to attend their boards. The problem lies in if a Soldier wins the Brigade NCO or Soldier board and are not Air Assault qualified they cannot advance to the Division level. The runner up if they are Air Assault qualified will represent the Brigade. What does that tell our NCOs and Soldiers that want to represent themselves and their units at the Division level and cannot because for some reason they are not Air Assault qualified? This policy displays partiality and favoritism for the forty-five percent of the NCOs and Soldiers assigned to the Division that are Air Assault qualified. How do we as leaders develop and build a team with this type of attitude coming from our higher headquarters?

There are many examples of favoritism and partiality within the Army, you can see it just about anywhere you care to look and it may not be obvious but is it there. The Army is changing and transforming, and you hear leaders and Soldiers both say it is a kinder and gentler Army. The new generation of Soldiers coming into our ranks today has the attitude of what is in it for me. I am concerned with where the Army is heading. We see more and more leaders asking their Soldiers to accomplish a mission or task instead of directing them to accomplish it, which is not leading.

The worst case of favoritism and partiality I have had the displeasure of witnessing in my twenty-four years of service took place in September 2003, in Q-West Iraq. The Brigade CSM hired me to be the new First Sergeant for the Aviation Brigade Headquarters and Headquarters Company in the 101st Airborne Division (AASLT). Before taking over the organization, I wanted

to talk to the First Sergeant to get some information on the unit, but the only information I got from the First Sergeant was he telling me the disgust he had for his Tactical Operations Platoon (TOC) and the NCOs within that platoon. I had been hearing rumors and rumblings of favoritism and partiality within the organization before I took over.

Well, my fears came true three days after I assumed responsibility for the organization, when five Soldiers came to me accusing the supply NCO of having sexual relations with an NCO from another unit both NCOs were married but not to each other. I informed the Commander and he initiated an investigation. I decided I needed to peel the layers of this onion back to find out what was truly happening within this unit.

The company was broke down into three platoons, the Tactical Operations Center Platoon (TOC), the Aviation Logistical Operations Center (ALOC), and the Company Headquarters Platoon. The former First Sergeant had been the Brigade's S-4 NCOIC (ALOC Platoon) prior to coming over to be the company First Sergeant. He had developed a dislike for the TOC Platoon and its NCOs during his time as the S4 NCOIC, and that dislike escalated when he became the company First Sergeant.

The former First Sergeant also established a very personal friendship with the company supply Sergeant. The supply Sergeant came to the organization straight from Advance Individual Training (AIT) and worked for the former First Sergeant in the S4 prior to becoming the company supply NCO. The problem started when the supply Sergeant thought she wore the First Sergeants rank when dealing with Soldiers, platoons, and NCOs from the company. The First Sergeant was aware of the problem and failed to correct it. The supply Sergeant was also disrespectful to several senior NCOs, but again the First Sergeant would not address the situation, because all the NCOs were from the TOC platoon.

You can probably see a severe pattern starting to show, well here is the straw that broke the units back. Several Soldiers witnessed the supply sergeant having sexual relations with another NCO from a different unit, the group of Soldiers went to the First Sergeant to report it, the First Sergeant again failed to do anything, and he would not even report it to the Commander. The NCOs and Soldiers of this company developed a strong distrust for the First Sergeant and the Chain of Command based on the First Sergeants demonstrated favoritism and partiality toward the supply Sergeant, and his dislike for the NCOs and Soldiers of the TOC platoon.

The inactions of the First Sergeant demoralized and separated the platoons within the company, to such a state that the unit could barely accomplish any mission that required cooperation between any of the platoons with the company. Individual platoons still accomplished all required missions and they did that with precision and effectiveness. The above stated situation is not rare in the Army unfortunately it is becoming more commonplace.

Conclusion

We as leaders, have the responsibility to provide our Soldiers the best leadership possible. We cannot accomplish this if we allow favoritism and partiality to exist with our units or our Army. Favoritism and partiality are the destroyers of moral and trust they are not rewards or incentives. We cannot develop highly disciplined teams to fight, win, and survive this Global War on Terrorism if we do not have the trust and confidence of our Soldiers. We as leaders must always do the right thing and set the standard, by treating all Soldiers with respect and fairness.

References

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