



The Army Profession, the Engineer Regiment, and the Character of Their Leaders

By Dr. Don M. Snider

As the Engineer Regiment considers how best to attract and retain the future leadership corps it needs—commissioned officers, noncommissioned officers, and civilians—for this new era of persistent conflict, there are three factors with major implications for the Regiment’s current efforts.

Implications for the Present

Profession vs. Bureaucracy. First, the Army that the Engineer Regiment serves is always precariously balanced between being a trusted vocational profession and being just another governmental bureaucracy. For many valid reasons, it is incredibly important which culture—profession or bureaucracy—is predominant within the Army and within the unit climate of each of its subelements. Among the most important reasons for the Army to be a profession are the following:

- There is no history of a bureaucracy ever creating the expert knowledge and practice of modern warfare. If America is to have effective land forces, the United States Army must be, and function as, a profession—not as a bureaucracy.
- Without a professional culture and its inherent ethos, the essential trust relationship between the Army and the American people it serves—one based on the Army’s expert capabilities and the effectiveness of their use—will be ruptured and at a potentially terrible price to both. After Abu Ghraib and similar incidents, some of that trust evaporated and only now is being regained.

Role of Army Leaders. The most significant factor in the resolution of this inherent tension between the two types of armies—professional or bureaucratic—will be the role played by Army leaders of all stripes. Day by day they will determine by their decisions, their presence, and their modeling whether America’s sons and daughters serve in the satisfying, fulfilling role of “a professional and an expert” (as the Soldier’s Creed states) or whether they will come to see themselves as merely time-serving government bureaucrats with no influence. Stated another way, the climate within any unit reflects accurately both the competence and the character

of the leadership of that unit. As they have done in the past, Soldiers will rightly continue to ask their leaders, including their Engineer Regiment leaders, “How can I be a professional if there is no profession?”

Development of Moral Character. The Army is generally very good at developing the tactical and technical competencies of its leaders; training in military skills has long been a strong suit among the Army’s core developmental routines. But it is equally clear that the Army is not nearly so good at developing, or more accurately, facilitating the development of the moral character of its leaders. Fortunately, the experiences of the Army in Iraq and Afghanistan have now renewed interest in a broader range of the human dimensions of such warfare and of the demands it places on Army leaders. To develop Army leaders for the future will take more than education and training. It will also take inspiration—individual moral awareness and development of a type that will allow leaders fully to accept and support the profession’s ethic by “living it 24/7.”

Implications for the Future

The issue this leads to is the moral character of Army leaders and the Army’s ability to understand the leader’s fighting spirit, the individual spirituality that so strongly informs individual character. This is not a new subject for the Army. Many older Soldiers will remember that for the post-World War II generation, General George C. Marshall spoke matter-of-factly about the common understanding within the Army: “The Soldier’s heart, the Soldier’s spirit, the Soldier’s soul are everything. Unless the Soldier’s soul sustains him, he cannot be relied on and he will fail himself, his commander, and his country in the end. It is not enough to fight. It is the spirit that wins the victory.”¹

How then does the Army, and those involved in the effort to rethink the development of leaders within the Engineer Regiment, understand and discuss the inspiration of individual leaders and its influence on their moral character and thus on their behavior, particularly in combat? The Army’s approach centers on the Warrior Ethos, which has been promulgated as a four-sentence portion of the Soldier’s Creed: “*I will always*

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place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade.” However, while concluding that it is crucial for “all Soldiers [to] truly understand and embody this Warrior Ethos,” the doctrine is almost silent on how such an element of character is embodied, developed, and sustained. There is no language, no developmental model, no suggested pedagogy. Even more unhelpfully, the doctrine states, “While individuals are responsible for their own character development, leaders are responsible for encouraging, supporting, and assessing the efforts of their people.”²

Competence vs. Character

So how are Army leaders to fulfill this critical leadership role if the Army dismisses character development as the responsibility of the individual?

For the engineer leadership working on the Building Great Engineers project, there are two suggestions. The first is to update the Engineer Regiment’s (and thus the profession’s) knowledge of human development with language and developmental models that elevate the understanding and discussion of human spirituality to where it belongs and where it exists in current university research programs—to a position above religion. (For example, see <http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/>.) Simply stated, this means that the Regiment understands and accepts that the spirituality of its Soldiers and leaders—their inspiration and worldview that shape character—can be informed by many sources, only one of which might, at the choice of the individual, be religion.

The second suggestion is that the leadership adopt the position that the Regiment’s institutional role and responsibility in the realm of the Soldier’s inspiration is to facilitate the individual’s search for the moral meaning that defines a leader’s personal character. This means moving beyond the Army’s current “we don’t do that” approach to the character development of its Soldiers and leaders. Research from Iraq continues to show that authentically moral leaders better earn their followers’ trust and thus possess a greater ability to exercise high-impact leadership. In a stateside setting, this means producing leaders who are better able to mentor Soldiers and junior leaders, and thus the developmental process goes on and on.

This is not to suggest that the Regiment decrease its emphasis on developing the tactical competence of its Soldiers or leaders. However, the Regiment should restore appropriate

balance to the development of both their competence and character. Both remain, as operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have repeatedly shown, essential to Soldiers and leaders in effective fighting forces.

Summary

In summary, the result of implementing these two suggestions over time should be two very salutary developmental outcomes for the Engineer Regiment and for the Army profession. Soldiers and leaders will be better grounded individually in what they believe and in their strength of will to act on those beliefs. And the dissonance between what they believe and hold dear and what the institution declares is “right”—according to the professional military ethic embodied in traditions such as the seven Army Values—would be reduced. Both outcomes move the Regiment and the profession in the direction of a more cohesive and effective fighting force.



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Endnotes

¹ H.A. DeWeerd (Editor) “Selected Speeches and Statements of General of the Army George Catlett Marshall,” *The Infantry Journal*, 1945.

² Field Manual 6-22, *Army Leadership*, 12 October 2006.

