



Everybody's Business

Everyone has pet peeves, and one of mine is litter. I can't pass by a piece of trash, no matter how big or small, and just let it continue lying on the ground. I have to pick it up and find a garbage can, even though it's not technically my "job" to do so. I look at it like this: We all share the same common spaces, and everyone should do their part to take care of it. Rank and position don't matter — it's about doing what's right for the greater good. Besides, it's what, 10-20 seconds out of my day?

It's the same with safety. Just because you have unit safety officers doesn't mean you should overlook safety violations or breaches of standards, thinking it's their job to handle the issue. One of our most fundamental duties as Soldiers is executing our missions at minimum risk. When you see your fellow Soldiers violating standards, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and don't speak up, you miss the opportunity to maintain standards and prevent a needless accident; at worst, the situation ends in the tragic loss of life.

This is where a discussion of culture becomes relevant. Our Army culture is defined by the Warrior Ethos and our seven Army Values, with many other subcultures at play (for example, Aviation doesn't have the same culture as Infantry, and so on). Safety, I believe, is at its core an unspoken "eighth" Army value that affects every branch, every MOS and every person. We should be building a safety culture that motivates everyone on the team to do the right thing all the time, for both themselves and their fellow Soldiers.

The term "safety culture" was born from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the first time in modern history that attitude, at both the individual and organizational level, was recognized for directly impacting not only safety, but also efficiency and accuracy. Private industry soon adopted the safety culture model, and our nation's military has taken a special interest in it during the last decade or so. The Army's sustained downward trend in accidents during the past several years shows our safety culture is evolving in the right direction.

But that doesn't mean we don't have room or the obligation to grow. There are still "pockets" where safety is seen more as an externally applied mandate that comes from the top and trickles its way down to the lowest level. Studies from both the private and public sectors have shown, however, that safety culture fully matures only when change comes from the top and bottom simultaneously. In effect, we have to make every Soldier a safety leader with ownership of not only their personal safety, but the Army Safety Program, and give them a voice in the safety process. That means leaders will have to listen, and those charged with safety functions within their units must realize safety isn't proprietary — it's everyone's business.

We've also got to move away from a compliance-based mindset. Those "check the block" requirements outlined in regulations and directives provide only a framework for safety programs. Commanders who fail to look within and allow their Soldiers a say in safety are building a very shaky house, one that cannot stand up to the tests of hazards and risk. Filling in the gaps between those directives with thoughtful, proactive mitigation strategies tailored to the unit's unique circumstances provides the best foundation for Soldiers to stay safe 24/7, whatever their duty status or activity.

Finally, I believe we need to rethink the way we look at "accidents." The term itself suggests we're not in control of anything going on around us. Combined with the generally accepted notions that accidents just happen and a certain amount of risk is to be expected, we've set up our Soldiers for failure. The plain truth is we are in control, accidents aren't inevitable and while risk may be ever-present, there's certainly a lot we can do to mitigate, reduce and even eliminate it. As leaders, fate can play no part in establishing a proper safety culture, and we must not approach our safety programs believing it does.

I said in my introductory column here a couple months ago that I don't have all the answers. I'm still learning, and from what I know right now, I truly believe there is no end to the progression of our safety culture. It will change with the times and be affected by countless external factors, like whether our Army is at peace or war or how funding shortfalls affect every aspect of operations. What's important is that we keep up and evolve right along with it.

I welcome your feedback on this subject and any problems or concerns you have. To do my job effectively, I must know your needs first. Please let me know how I can help and how the USACR/Safety Center is or isn't assisting you and your Soldiers in meeting your safety goals.

You all do a remarkable job every day for our Soldiers, their Families and our Civilian workforce. I thank you for that and hope you have a wonderful fall season. Remember that many of your Soldiers will be taking advantage of the cooler weather for long motorcycle rides or celebrating with friends at tailgates and football parties. Looking out for one another and treating safety as an absolutely imperative part of your job will do a lot to ensure everyone makes it home alive.



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