

Soldiers, from junior enlisted to senior officers, assigned to the 2nd Brigade Combat Team "Commandos," 10th Mountain Division, Fort Drum, N.Y., met April 3rd, 2014, to discuss what it means to be a member of the Commando brigade. This illustration depicts the key qualities held by the Commando Brigade. (Courtesy image by Jeannel King)

Engaging Soldiers

Leveraging Employee Engagement Strategies to Increase Soldier Productivity, Independence, and Retention

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Soldier engagement is the implementation of leadership techniques and fostering of unit culture to promote high rates of participation within a unit. While creating a brand-new Soldier engagement strategy or policy may sound like a major overhaul, many pieces of the puzzle already exist. They need only be combined and placed into a context of Soldier engagement, then presented to Army leaders to use in leadership roles. Soldier engagement can be implemented through institutional changes to doctrine, the command climate survey, Professional Military Education

(PME), and through everyday leadership techniques.

This article seeks to highlight the benefits of employee engagement for Soldiers by analyzing and presenting multiple studies on how engaged employees are more productive, safer, and more likely to remain in the organization. Then it shall present recommendations to Army leaders on creating and promoting a culture to increase Soldier engagement through specific strategies and leadership training. It will also discuss how to implement the types of employee engagement strategies available to personnel managers.

Employee engagement is a term primarily used in human resource and management departments of both private and public businesses. Ultimately, effective Soldier engagement can improve the Army in a multitude of ways. Soldiers will be more productive and complete tasks more efficiently. Soldiers will also have a better understanding of their organizational leaders' goals and expectations, connecting them to their work and allowing them to exercise initiative. With greater Soldier engagement, Soldiers are more likely to remain in the Army, reducing the need for thorough retention strategies and increasing the pool of experienced Soldiers.

Finally, even for those who do choose to exit the Army, a greater level of Soldier engagement will result in them displaying positive attitudes towards the Army as a civilian. Such attitudes improve the public reputation of the Army, indirectly leading to increased recruitment rates and a greater level of trust between the Army and the nation over the long-term.

The Development of Employee Engagement

The concept, study, and implementation of employee engagement strategies has taken off over the last few decades. A number of empirical research studies indicate that engaged employees are more productive, can work independently, and are more likely to stay within the organization rather than seek employment elsewhere, thereby eliminating the cost, time, and loss in productivity incurred when an experienced employee departs.¹ Frederick Winslow Taylor's 1903 book, *Shop Management*, was one of the first attempts at research into how an employee's connection to their work affects productivity.² The concept and research has developed into the idea of employee satisfaction and now to the modern concept of employee engagement. Employee engagement is not simply ensuring employees are happy or consistently working; it is a measure of the connection to their everyday work, and the goals and purpose of their organization.

Despite the existence of statistical evidence that correlates engagement levels with success in accomplishing an organization's goals, current Army leadership doctrine does not adequately address the implementation of a comprehensive employee engagement strategy.³ Junior leaders receive minimal, if any, express training in understanding the importance or implementation of employee engagement, despite serving as the direct supervisor of the majority of Army Soldiers. While the Army does have Training Circular (TC) 6-22.6, *Employee Engagement*, its primary audience is only Army Civilians and their supervisors, not Soldiers.⁴ Given the merits of effective employee engagement, the Army would benefit in developing, training leaders on, and implementing a strategy for Soldier engagement.

Particularly in today's Army of instantaneous cell phone information flow, meetings, and reliance on PowerPoint briefings, and with geographically separated command chains reliant upon email and Video Conferencing (VTC), it can be easy for subordinates to feel distant, creating disengagement. This disengagement can create rightful frustration, lower morale, and ultimately decrease a unit's warfighting readiness.

Defining Employee Engagement

TC 6-22.6 defines employee engagement as "the level of commitment an employee has for the organization and the level of initiative applied to their duties." Employee engagement consists of multiple factors, to include the mission, organization, work unit, the individual employee, and the work itself.⁵ It is important to note that employee engagement applies to all positions and ranks, from the newest employee to the Chief Executive Officer, or in the case of the Army, from the newest private to the Chief of Staff of the Army.

TC 6-22.6 categorizes employees into the same three categories defined in a 2013 Gallup research report, *State of the American Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for US Business Leaders*. The first category of employees are "not engaged". These employees simply show up to work, are not necessarily hostile, but nor are they constructive. They are "checked out," merely passing time to get to the end of their workday.

Secondly, there are "actively disengaged" employees, those that are actually destructive to the work environment. Actively disengaged employees consume managers' time, exhibit higher rates of work defects, precipitate more workplace accidents, and generally detract from the organization accomplishing its goals.

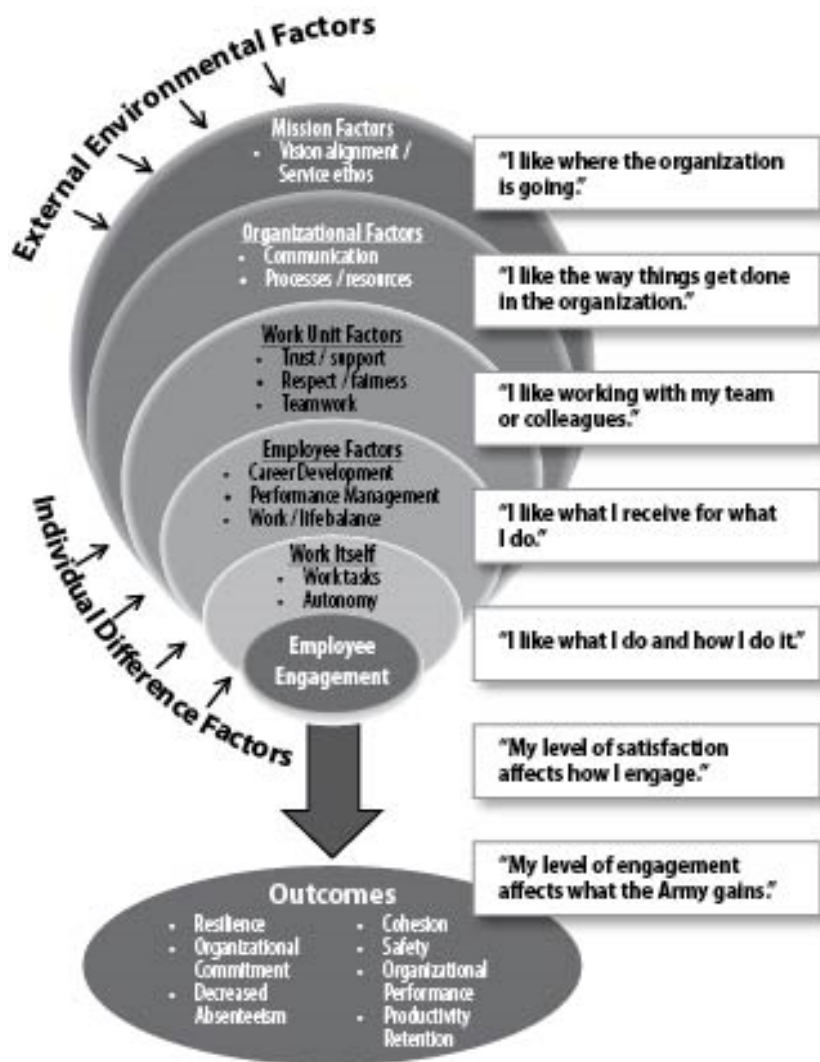
Finally, the goal of employee engagement: "engaged" employees. These employees are involved, enthusiastic, and attempt to grow and improve their organization. They feel connected to the organization and its goals. Therefore, engaged employees are able and inspired to work independently to improve their organization.⁶

Benefits of Effective Employee Engagement

Businesses classify the benefits of employee engagement into a few key areas, including service, sales, revenue, shareholder returns, and so on. This article will only present data on those studies that closely correlate to Soldiers and the Army, including absenteeism, safety, and retention. Businesses with a higher rate of engaged employees experience larger growth and higher profitability, according to studies by Hewitt Associates and Gallup.⁷

Through statistical meta-analysis of responses based on the Gallup's Q12 employee engagement survey model and other research studies, the Gallup researchers were

able to compare the top and bottom quartile of organizations based on different business utilities. Essentially, a top-quartile organization had a rate of engaged employees that scored in the top 25% of organizations studied, while a bottom-quartile organization was in the lower 25% of those organizations based on rate of engaged employees.⁸



The meta-analysis resulted in a 41% median percentage difference in absenteeism for top-quartile employee engagement organizations as compared to those in the bottom quartile across 30 organizations researched. Absenteeism measures included the average number of days missed per person divided by the total days available for work. Decreasing absenteeism resulted in more workers present on the job more often. Based on the data, engaged employees are more likely to be on the job and available for work.⁹

Additionally, the Gallup Q12 examined 53 organizations' safety data. Between the top and bottom quartile organiza-

tions, there was a 70% difference in improved safety records. Safety measures included percentage of workdays lost as a result of incidents, number of incidents, or incident rates. Safety is not only essential for preserving the warfighting readiness of the Army's Soldiers and equipment, but also requires substantial training time, risk assessments, and incident reviews. As the meta-analysis shows, engaged

employees have lower incident rates and therefore spend less time away from their actual work.¹⁰ Given the Army's sometimes dangerous duty environment, including vehicle bays, warehouses, field conditions, and heavy equipment, this is a specific point of interest for leaders hoping to reduce safety incidents and their resulting consequences on equipment and personnel readiness.

Finally, the Gallup analysis examined 106 organizations' annualized turnover rates, an estimate of how many employees leave the organization on average per year. The analysis differentiated between high and low turnover organizations, with 40% annualized turnover as the threshold. For high-turnover organizations, those in the top quartile of engagement rates experienced a 24% lower median turnover, while low-turnover top-quartile organizations exhibited a 59% difference. Therefore, organizations with greater engagement had less turnover than those that did not.¹¹ Turnover rates can be extremely expensive for the Army, as the Army must recruit, contract, train, and transport new Soldiers to replace those who leave. Recruitment and retention bonuses can result in additional costs. Through reducing turnover, the Army would also in-

crease the pool from which to promote, elevating the overall quality of promoted Soldiers at all ranks.

These are just three easily quantifiable benefits of employee engagement that relate to the Army. There are a number of additional qualitative benefits that, while not easily measurable, result in better workplace productivity. Through creating a culture of engagement, leaders ensure that their subordinates can work independently, effectively reducing the time required in meetings, progress updates, or spending time rectifying issues after the fact. This promotes efficiency for both leader and subordinate.

Soldier Engagement in the Army Today

Most leaders and Soldiers can likely recall multiple occasions of feeling disengaged. Despite the research and implementation of engagement programs in other industries, the Army has not adopted a formal engagement strategy or policy for Soldiers, only for civilian employees. Additionally, first-line leaders, namely leaders of teams, squads, and platoons, who benefit the most from using engagement strategies, do not receive formal engagement training. Junior noncommissioned officers and company-grade officers have the greatest direct impact on the majority of Soldiers in the Army. Equipping them with the necessary engagement skills can boost their Soldiers' efficiency, independence, quality of work, and retention.

Now, that does not exempt a master sergeant, or even a brigade commander from understanding and reaping the rewards of Soldier engagement. Firstly, these leaders can engage their subordinate leaders. While research by Quantum Workplace demonstrates that engagement increases with higher level positions, the same strategies that help and promote lower-level workers' engagement also work to improve engagement for supervisors and managers.¹² Leaders engaging with their subordinates is essential at all levels. Senior leaders can also use their engagement knowledge and experience to implement and supervise large-scale engagement programs across their formation and ensure a culture of effective Soldier engagement. Such senior leaders can help mentor and train new leaders on the benefits and techniques of effective engagement.

To be clear, this is not an argument that the Army does not train or encourage leaders to implement many of the strategies or skills associated with engagement. However, these Army leadership techniques are not currently unified into a single strategy or policy. While junior Army leaders may receive formal instruction in their PME courses in the specifics of individual methods, like writing award recommendations or using Troop Leading Procedures (TLPs), they are not trained to combine all of these to formulate and implement engagement strategies at their squad or platoon levels.

Institutional Recommendations

From a large, institutional standpoint, implementing Soldier engagement can be presented to Army leaders through changes to doctrine, the command climate survey, and PME. A first method is to adapt the current TC 6-22.6, *Employee Engagement*, to include Soldiers and civilian employees. TC 6-22.6 already covers strategies in sections such as "Improving Processes and Systems," "Recognizing, Rewarding, and Managing Performance," "Empowering Employee Autonomy and Ownership," and others.¹³ By taking the practice of civilian employee engagement, transitioning it to a military concept of

Soldier engagement, and then teaching that to Army leaders, it can provide a concise snapshot of what engagement is, the benefits of effective Soldier engagement, and how it can be implemented in the Army. It would set a foundation for the concept of Soldier engagement. While there is a plethora of doctrine on Army leadership, there is currently no concise, easily digestible, and simply implementable strategy to combine the aspects of effective Army leadership and tailor them to the needs of Soldiers.

A second recommendation is to adapt a tool that the Army already has to help leaders measure Soldier engagement within their unit: the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI) Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS), or the command climate survey. While many may regard the DEOCS as focused primarily on a commander's Equal Opportunity and Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention programs, the current questions also provide insights into whether Soldiers are engaged or not. There are multiple sections of questions directly related to engagement, such as "Job Satisfaction" and "Trust in Leadership," even one titled "Engagement."¹⁴ However, the DEOCS report format simply presents the data on the survey answers, rather than linking the data to a greater strategy of engagement, or even to the three categories of employees discussed earlier: not engaged, actively disengaged, and engaged employees.¹⁵ Teaching commanders how the responses of the DEOCS relates to Soldier engagement can improve their ability to help engage their Soldiers and see what areas they can improve. Future surveys can also include more engagement-based questions to provide a better representation of a unit's Soldier engagement.

A third avenue for implementing Soldier engagement is engagement training in PME courses. A point of contention may be that PME courses are already packed with requirements for tactical, technical, and leadership training. However, given the importance of Soldier engagement and its potential benefit to the Army as a whole, implementing Soldier engagement training need not detract from nor extend existing PME.

For example, many leaders already learn and practice TLPs during their PME courses. By attaching the aspect of Soldier engagement, PME instructors not only ensure their students know the basics of executing TLPs, but also provide the context and benefits of communication, planning, and personnel management. It provides the new leaders an overarching strategy and leadership concepts that they can link their leadership techniques to.

Implementing Soldier Engagement Tomorrow

It is universally understood that change takes time to develop and implement. Therefore, in the meantime,

what can leaders start doing today to boost Soldier engagement? How can leaders better promote a culture of engagement?

First, leaders can examine their unit's counseling program. Rather than just "checking the box" on monthly Soldier counseling, leaders can truly focus on the communication aspect and engage in productive career-oriented conversations with their subordinates. Army counseling is designed to be a two-way communication, allowing subordinates to pose questions, thoughts, and bring concerns to their supervisors. An effective counseling program allows leaders to not only lay out expectations for daily duties, but also develop their subordinates, identify what they need to succeed, and create a better workflow.¹⁶ However, this engagement opportunity is heavily under-utilized, as described by the 2015 Strategic Studies Institute study *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession*. The authors state that, "It is the exception, not the rule, that the face-to-face counseling mandated by the regulation and verified by three members of the chain of command ever occurs." The report goes on to discuss how leaders oftentimes list fake counseling dates on their evaluation reports and support forms, giving the untrue impression that leaders are coun-

seling their subordinates.¹⁷ Counseling is an excellent opportunity for leaders to connect with their subordinates, yet is largely under-utilized.

Further Reading: NCO Journal's [Developmental Counseling](#)

A second technique is communicating the context of the work that Soldiers are doing. Many leaders can probably remember overhearing a common Soldier gripe: "Why are we doing this?" Leaders can provide the context for Soldier's duties and the importance of their actions and link it to the unit's mission and the leader's vision. For many, the overarching concept of "readiness" or "deterrence" may seem vague and not immediately pertinent, particularly during a period of relatively low combat levels.

Today, the Army is globally involved, preparing for a myriad of contingency operations, working ever-closer with an ever-growing list of international allies and partners. Therefore, providing the full picture of operations and exercises, no matter the scale, will make Soldiers feel more connected to their work, not just during said exercises, but in all regular tasks and duties. This can be accomplished by providing an



Soldiers from U.S. Army Central Command Warrior Leader Course conduct their final training lanes and evaluations with squads of soldiers versus mock opposing forces across multiple lanes during the early morning of July 11, 2014 in Camp Buehring, Kuwait. (N.Y. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Harley Jelisi)

exercise overview instead of solely a rehearsal of your unit's role in the exercise, or implementing regular threat briefs, exercise-based or real, so that Soldiers understand why they need to train the way they do.

Furthermore, it's important to communicate the results of actions and celebrate success or assess failures accordingly. This lets Soldiers know how they are making a difference in the Army and in the world, even at their individual level. This is quite similar to the correlation between celebrating success and higher academic achievement seen in education. Just as highlighting success can boost a classroom's academic prowess, so too can a focus on success and celebration boost engagement.¹⁸

A counter-argument to the importance of Soldier engagement may be that the Army does not necessarily need a high rate of engaged employees, particularly among the lower ranks. Rather, the Army needs "cogs in the wheel," or simply a large pool of Soldiers to achieve tasks that are at times rather menial. It can be understandably difficult for a Soldier to feel engaged when they are ordered to clean a vehicle or repack a CONEX. However, that only highlights the need to provide the big picture perspective of daily duties and tasks. Simply providing a brief explanation on why packing the equipment in a CONEX is important (protecting it from the elements, having the contents ready to deploy in the event of an emergency deployment, etc.) can help provide a frame of reference for junior Soldiers. They will be more likely to take care in those menial tasks and work more efficiently, being engaged as they can connect their everyday tasks to a larger purpose and to the mission of the unit.

Finally, by spending additional time training, educating, and developing subordinate leaders and Soldiers in their tasks and duties, leaders can trust subordinates to act independently. For example, imagine a platoon sergeant receiving a new squad leader. By investing the initial time to develop that leader technically, tactically,

and as a leader, it will allow the squad leader to learn their job, feel more confident, and act independently as time progresses. This then gives greater time to both the leader and subordinate, as they have to spend less time down the road re-learning from mistakes that could have been prevented with that initial investment. It also creates a snowball effect, as that squad leader can begin to develop their subordinate team leaders and Soldiers. By trusting subordinate leaders to act independently, there will be growing pains, but leaders can use them as educational tools to further develop their subordinates. Establishing that trust at all levels of leadership can boost Soldier engagement and will foster a culture of development across that unit.

Through a combination of the institutional and leadership recommendations above, the Army can begin to shift leadership cultures towards Soldier engagement. The institutional changes can help the Army as a whole better equip our junior leaders with the knowledge and tools to engage their Soldiers. The practical examples can help leaders at all levels begin to grow that Soldier engagement culture in their unit, all towards the goal of using a concerted leadership strategy to boost Soldier engagement and reap the rewards of having engaged Soldiers.

Conclusion

Leaders across all services of the military have often emphasized the importance of the human aspect in war. Regardless of the weapons or technology, it is the human aspect that allows a state to execute military operations and will continue to enable the United States to overcome diverse national security issues in the future. The Army's junior leaders are a critical piece of this strategy and will benefit even more from implementing a unified Soldier engagement strategy that will increase productivity, independence, and retention, producing stronger future leaders and improving the development and readiness of our Army. ■

Notes

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