The VCSA's number one priority for the "A Life Worth Living" campaign is, "How does the Army improve the knowledge, skills, and abilities of junior NCOs so they can better serve as a first line of defense against suicide?" Protecting the Tribe is an attempt to meet this challenge.

Protecting the Tribe:
Confronting Suicide and Enhancing Readiness through Engaged Leadership

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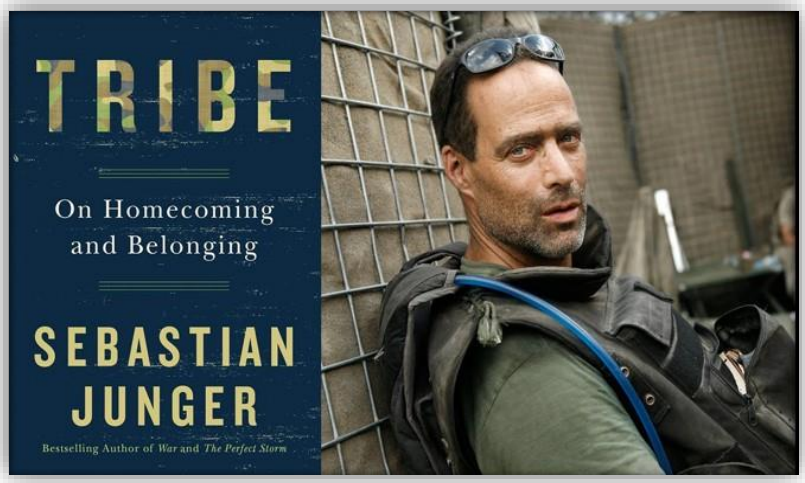
Suicide within the Army continues to receive intense scrutiny, and for good reason. When a Soldier ends their own life, they take with them the talent and experience that are essential to our overall readiness. More importantly, the tragic circumstances of their decision can send emotional and psychological shockwaves throughout the formation, leading to a further loss in readiness. The true goal of readiness is not just that every Soldier is present for duty, but that they are committed, body and soul, to mission accomplishment. Suicide is a massive obstacle to achieving this level of commitment.

Protecting the Tribe is an effort born out of frustration. In 2017 I served under a BCT commander committed to creating a positive and affirming climate for all Soldiers. This was backed by supportive division

and corps commands. Nevertheless, the number of ideations, attempts, and completed suicides continued with little change. Our conclusion was this: If junior leaders, particularly those at platoon and squad level, are not fully invested in the fight against suicide, then the best laid plans and intentions at higher levels will make little difference.

The question remained of how to best inspire the kind of engaged leadership necessary to cause a culture shift. This challenge was echoed by the VCSA's number one priority for his "A Life Worth Living" campaign, "How does the Army improve the knowledge, skills, and abilities of junior NCOs so they can better serve as a first line of defense against suicide?"[1] Protecting the Tribe is an attempt to meet this challenge.



Junger believes the reason why some Soldiers wish they could return to combat is not that they miss fighting. Instead, they miss an experience of tribal closeness that comes with it, something they find completely absent from 21st century American life.

The Tribe

The name comes from Sebastian Junger's book *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging.* Junger spent the better part of 2009 embedded with platoons of the 2-503rd in Afghanistan. Upon returning home, Junger learned that many of those Soldiers wished they could return to their days in combat outposts like Restrepo. As Junger relates, this is not an uncommon reaction:

> Any discussion of veterans and their common experience of alienation must address the fact that so many soldiers find themselves missing the war after it's over. That troubling fact can be found in written accounts from war after war, country after country, century after century. As awkward as it is to say, part of the trauma of war seems to be giving it up. What people miss presumably isn't danger or loss but *the unity* that [war can] often engender.[2]

Junger believes the reason for this phenomenon is not that Soldiers miss combat. Instead, they miss an experience of tribal closeness that comes with it, something they find completely absent from 21st century American life:

> A person living in a modern city or a suburb can, for the first time in history, go through an entire day—or an entire life—mostly encountering complete strangers. They can be surrounded by others and yet feel deeply, dangerously alone. The evidence that this is hard on us is overwhelming. Although happiness is notoriously subjective and difficult to measure, mental illness is not. Numerous cross-cultural studies have shown that modern society—despite its nearly miraculous advances in medicine, science, and technology— is afflicted with some of the highest rates of depression, schizophrenia, poor health, anxiety, and chronic loneliness in human history. As affluence and urbanization rise in a society, rates of depression and suicide tend to go up rather than down.[3]

Junger points to *self-determination theory* (SDT) to help explain what is wrong with our contemporary culture. SDT is about motivation, or what drives people

to do what they do. Psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan developed the theory and suggest that all people tend to be driven by a need to grow and gain fulfillment.[4] According to SDT, people need to feel the following in order to live a fulfilled life:

Competence: The need to gain mastery of tasks and learn different skills.

Connectedness: The need to experience a sense of belonging and attachment to others.

Autonomy: The need to feel in control of their own behaviors and goals.

The thesis of Junger's book is essentially that our present culture, with its social isolation and focus on affluence, makes it virtually impossible to satisfy these needs. The type of culture that does allow for it is found in *the tribe*. Tribes are divisions within a society consisting of families and individuals linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect. Junger believes tribal warriors are better positioned to handle the trauma of combat because they do not experience a significant transition when they return home:

> Given the profound alienation of modern society, when combat vets say that they miss the war, they might be having an entirely healthy response to life back home. Iroquois warriors did not have to struggle with that sort of alienation because warfare and society existed in such close proximity that there was effectively no transition from one to the other.[5]

According to Junger, the essential characteristics of the tribe have been stripped away from most of modern American society, with the exception of the military. The Army in particular is one of the few institutions left that provides its members with many of the tribe's most important aspects.

The Army & the Tribe: *Similarities.* In the Army, we share a common culture (uniforms, traditions, vocabulary) and recognize achievement in ways outsiders would not understand (medals, badges, streamers).We also experience shared suffering as a group (FTXs, deployments, combat), with most of these occurring at the platoon and squad level, the same intimate community Junger holds up as an example to emulate. If all of this is true, why do we find ourselves facing many of the same challenges of the non-tribal culture that surrounds us (suicide, depression, domestic violence, etc.)?

The Army & the Tribe: *Differences.* Unlike the Native American tribes Junger uses as examples, we in the Army have one foot firmly planted in the culture around us. This is precisely why the Soldiers interviewed by Junger express a desire to return to their days in combat. In Afghanistan, during the height of the conflict and in the most contentious locations, the break with modern culture was close to total.

Another difference is that we are not born into our tribe. Soldiers join as young adults with backgrounds, experiences, and values that come from outside the tribe and may or may not align with it. They also bring their families with them, families who often do not share in what we are doing or understand what we are trying to accomplish. Worse, all Soldiers understand that their time within this tribe will be temporary, as a PCS or ETS will sever the relationship at some point. Finally, a sense of autonomy can, for many Soldiers, be lost as their future often seems determined by people or circumstances beyond their control.

Seeking a Tribe. A 2014 study comparing the draft era force with that of the all-volunteer era shows how today's Soldiers are far more likely to have childhood trauma and alienation in their pasts.[6] As sociologist

Glen Elder points out, one of the main reasons young people volunteer for the Army is to finally find a tribe to belong to, "The military can serve as a surrogate family, a group that has ties that will last a lifetime."[7] The Army was their last and best chance to find and join a tribe. When they enlist, and end up being disappointed, despair can easily set in. Where else is there to go?

Bridging the Gap. One thing that can bridge the gap between the ideal tribe and the one the Army offers is *engaged leadership*. By engaged, we mean the type of leadership that invests the time necessary to truly know and understand each Soldier, and then to act accordingly to ensure they have the support they need to maintain their resiliency. In the absence of the type of combat that forces units to band together to both survive and to succeed, leaders must rely on other means to achieve the same end. This is not an easy task. As such, the following insights are intended to aid leaders at every echelon in the task of caring for the Soldiers entrusted to them and to supply the three fundamental needs of *competence, connection,* and *autonomy.*

Expert-level training helps meet the need for competence, but leaders must make the time available for these opportunities and to encourage their Soldiers to participate.

The Need for Competence

Expert-level training. Of the three essential needs mentioned earlier, the need for *competence* is the one the Army is best positioned to provide for. The desire to gain mastery and expertise at specific skill sets is literally stamped on many of our training opportunities (the *Expert* Infantryman's Badge, the *Expert* Field Medical Badge, the Rappel *Master* Course, etc.). No matter how busy the OPTEMPO, leaders must make the time available for these opportunities and to encourage their Soldiers to participate. The next challenge is to expand these types of programs to encompass each MOS and rank, especially for the most junior Soldiers.

Higher Education. Even if expert-level training were not available for some ranks or duty positions, the pursuit of higher education is available to all. To pursue a diploma or higher degree requires time, but it would also help fulfill the need for competence and personal growth. If so, then leader support for such endeavors is critical.

The Need for Connection I

Integration (Reception). Ordinarily, tribal integration begins at birth. This is not the case in the Army and so makes integration a challenge that must be met successfully. Integration should be focused at the squad and platoon level which is where Soldiers spend the majority of their time and is where shared suffering occurs. How this process begins is critical because we do not always know what life experiences an incoming Soldier may be burdened with. We must be proactive and intentional in making each new member understand that they are not only joining a unit, but also a family, a tribe.

Integration must also happen early. If the Soldier is of the type described earlier, one with hopes of finding in their unit a tribe they always wanted but never had, then time is not on our side. While they may not know what it means to be in a tribe, they have plenty of

experience with the opposite, and it will not take them long to make a determination about their present circumstances. The critical window are the days immediately preceding and following initial reception.

Finally, integration must be affirming. The days of stringing the "new guy" along through days and weeks of alienation, waiting for the Soldier to earn their way into the trust of the unit, must come to an end. The Soldier can and will make a determination about their future in the unit from first impressions, and if they are lost early they may never be recovered. Junior leaders should instead make the new arrival feel as if they have just joined the finest squad in the Army, a place it is a privilege to be a part of. In support of this goal, integration should take on the challenge of making the Soldier feel that they have not just a job, but a vocation.

Integration (Vocation). One aspect of a tribe is that the members see its success as of greater value than that of the individual. This will never happen without every member seeing themselves as part of something special, something greater than themselves. In other words, they must have a vocation (a calling). The ideal method for instilling and maintaining this outlook is an emphasis on history and tradition. Thankfully, the 101st is rich in both. However, while we are blessed to have such a legacy to point to, it is of little value if it is not emphasized as something *to live up to* by every member.

As professionals, we are obligated to do our own research on the history of the unit to which we are assigned. While this may be true, but it is also true that our youngest Soldiers are likely not meeting this obligation. They need to be taught about the lineage they are now a part of. Moreover, when senior leaders are the ones doing the teaching, it provides reinforcement that our history is important, that it lives on today, and that they are part of something special.

Integration (The Family). While integration into the unit-tribe is critical, it is not the most important. Instead, it is the Soldier's family that is essential to his or her level of resiliency. It is essential because that tribe is the one that, under ideal circumstances, the Soldier will remain a member of throughout their life. Soldiers move from unit to unit, tribe to tribe, and eventually will ETS. What should remain constant is the family and the intimate bonds that are created within it.

Yet this poses a challenge. Unlike the tribes Junger describes, in the Army our families do not travel with us or share in our labors. Too often they are left "outside the camp", feeling the effects of tribal life, but never truly sharing in it. Worse, many of our Soldiers do not possess the relational skills necessary for a healthy family life. Thankfully, we have elements already in place that are designed to meet both challenges.

The Family Readiness Group, if fully implemented and supported, will help bridge the gap between the family and unit tribes. If we cannot take our families with us, either in garrison or on deployments, we must make them feel like members of our tribe, which they are. Information sharing, as full and complete as possible, is the critical element in making this happen. Events that include the families can also play an important role, but they come second to providing insight into what the division is doing, why it is doing it, and for how long.

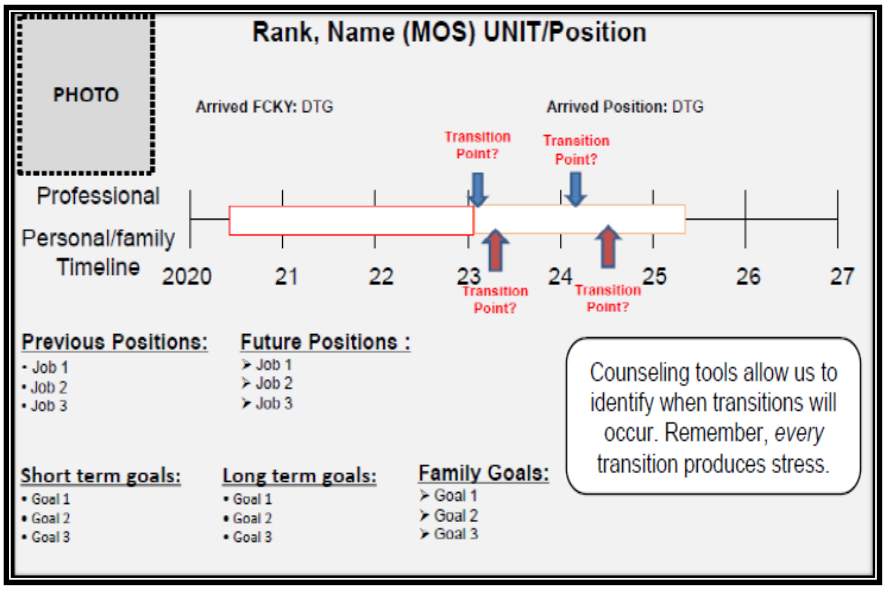
When it comes to relational skills, the Army's long running Strong Bonds program remains an invaluable asset. The program's purpose is to provide training in basic yet essential relationship skills to help each service member build and maintain connectedness within the family. Strong Bonds and similar programs should not be an afterthought, but rather a pillar in each leader's

plan to assist their subordinates in building strong connections at home and in the unit.

In the attempt to equip junior leaders with the skills necessary to provide their Soldiers with a sense of connection, two simple and yet profound ideas are critical: *transition theory* and *mattering*. While simple, they nonetheless can have a powerful effect when exercised by leaders who approach them with the seriousness they deserve.

The Need for Connection II

Transitions (The Hidden Stressor). A *transition* is "Any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles."[8] Transitions share some common characteristics. First, everyone goes through them, and each one produces stress. Whether that stress ends up having a positive or negative effect is based on the individual's ability to adapt. Second, experience does not guarantee future success. Simply because I have faced a similar transition multiple times in the past does not guarantee I will adapt to the stress of the current transition in a positive way. The reason is that the conditions are never exactly the same and, even if they were, I am different! Finally, transitions are subjective. This means that it is how the individual undergoing the transition feels about the experience that matters, not those who are viewing it from the outside. There are three categories of transitions:



1. Anticipated (or occur predictably).

PCS, Marriage

Parenthood (planned)

Deployment, Retirement

2. Unanticipated (cannot be predicted).

Death of a loved one

Divorce

Serious injury/illness

Parenthood (unplanned)

Sudden financial hardship

Career change

3. "Non-Events" (expected, but do not occur).

School failure (Ranger, Air Assault, etc.)

Passed over for promotion

PCS orders revoked/changed,

Loss of child (miscarriage, etc.)

Category two's are the only transitions engaged leaders cannot account for. If we are engaged in the life of our subordinate, we will know when category one's are occurring and can prepare them for the possibility of category three's.

Counseling tools can be a great benefit in identifying transition points in the life of our subordinates. "Baseball Card" snapshots of their career goals or "Five Year Plan" timelines provide leaders with critical insight into where transition stress will occur. The leader can then proactively look out for that subordinate and ensure they navigate them successfully, especially since the

leader has likely navigated the same transition at some point in their own life.

As was mentioned before, any transition, regardless of category, produces stress. Dealing with that stress is called *adaptation*, a process during which an individual moves from being totally preoccupied with the transition to integrating it into his or her life. According to transition theory, the success or failure of adaptation is dependent on the ratio of the individual's *assets* and *liabilities*.

Assets are found principally in the individual themselves (values, spirituality, resiliency, etc.) or in the social support structures around them (family unit, friendships, institutional, etc.). A lack of these assets, or if they are present but undeveloped, constitutes a liability. What is important to realize is that an individual who lacks personal assets can still successfully navigate a transition if their social support is strong. This is where the tribe, particularly at the squad and platoon level, must come to the forefront.

Leaders are not left without an aid in helping them determine how well positioned their subordinate is in regards to adaptation, as they can view the transition through the lens of the "4S's".[9] The combination of personal characteristics (SELF), the nature of the transition (SITUATION), how one deals with the stress of the transition (STRATEGIES), and what support systems are available (SUPPORT), determine how well an individual will adapt. If we know a subordinate is going through a transition, we should also know how strong they are in these areas and which ones will require additional attention.

All transitions produce stress and test resiliency. Therefore, based on a Soldier's adaptation, they have the potential to impact unit readiness. What leaders need to remember is that transitions are subjective. Simply because I, as a leader, do not see my subordinate's upcoming PCS as a negative (based on the assignment, I may see it as a career enhancing positive), does not mean that view is shared by the Soldier. Remember what we said about the tribe and SDT's emphasis on the importance of connectedness. If the Soldier has successfully integrated into his unit, shared in its sufferings, celebrated its successes, and built close bonds with fellow tribe members, it is not difficult to see how being uprooted from that environment and placed into another the Soldier knows nothing of can be seen as a negative.

"All transitions produce stress and test resiliency. Therefore, based on a Soldier's adaptation, they have the potential to impact unit readiness."

Leaders must be cognizant of two things when it comes to this type of a transition. First, we need to be sensitive to how the departing Soldier feels about the move. Leaving a tribe is a significant life event, and it should be treated as such by the unit. Farewell ceremonies are essential to communicating to the Soldier that their contributions to the tribe are recognized and appreciated. However, just as important is how the unit receives the Soldier who will be arriving to fill that vacant position. They too are leaving one tribe to join our own, about which they know nothing. How are we receiving them? Have we been in communication with them already, letting them know that we are looking forward to their joining our team, our family, our tribe? How we handle these types of transitions may be the easiest way to assist our Soldiers in their adaptation to the stress that accompanies them.

The focus of this section has been on one type of transition, the anticipated one of a PCS. However, since anything that causes "changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" produces stress, leaders must be able to support their Soldiers in all types of transitions. Is there any one thing that would make a difference in the life a Soldier, a fellow tribe member, regardless of the type of transition he or she faced? Counseling psychologist Nancy Schlossberg believes the concept of *mattering* is that thing.

"[Individuals] may rule out suicide if they feel they matter to others."

The Need for Connection III

According to Schlossberg, "Mattering refers to our belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else. This belief acts as a motivator."[10] Mattering covers five different areas:

1. Attention: *the feeling that one is noticed*

"The most elementary form of mattering is the feeling that one commands the interest or notice of another person."

2. Importance: *the belief that one is cared about*

"To believe that the other person cares about what we want, think, or do, or is concerned with our fate, is to matter."

3. Ego Extension: *someone will be proud of what one does or will sympathize with a failure*

"Although knowing that our failures are critical to another can be a burden, it also reconfirms that we matter to someone."

4. Dependence: *the feeling of feeling needed*

"A college sophomore, deeply depressed and suicidal, was unable to complete a course of study or prepare for a career, but got out of bed each day to be at drama rehearsals because 'they need me.'"

5. Appreciation: *one's efforts are appreciated by others*

"One interviewee mentioned that the boss only noticed what was being done wrong and never mentioned the positive contributions."

Mattering appears so obvious that it may seem odd that a theory needs to be developed to explain it. The reason for this is likely that it is universal. Everyone, leaders and subordinates alike, and at every level, need to feel that they matter to someone else. One reason combat is so effective in bonding units together is the sense that everyone is necessary, everyone matters. Yet it is Junger's central point in *Tribe* that this is not happening outside of the war zone. The battle against suicide will not be nearly as effective if this does not change. The power of this simple idea is seen in Schlossberg's comment that "[Individuals] may rule out suicide if they feel they matter to others."[11]

Beyond its application in combatting suicide, mattering can have an effect on other areas of readiness. A research study involving college students found that those who feel they matter are more likely to remain for a full four years. This relates directly to our desire to increase retention, particularly among our most talented tribe members. The study also showed that students who feel they matter are more involved and display a greater work ethic.[12] True readiness means more than just having every Soldier present for duty. What we want is for them to be fully invested in the mission at hand, and this study shows that mattering can help make that happen.

While simple, mattering is not necessarily easy. It is hard because it requires time, which is the scarcest of all resources, especially for leaders. It takes time to shift

attention from the mission and the organization to the individual, and to let them know they matter. Yet, if Schlossberg is correct, there may be no greater way to provide the type of connectedness SDT says our Soldiers require and to make them a part of our tribe.

The Need for Autonomy

Autonomy is an individual's need to feel in control of their own behaviors and goals. Goals allow individuals to undergo suffering and sacrifice as long as they are convinced they are necessary to goal achievement. However, when they either stop setting goals, or believe them to be beyond their reach, they lose hope in a brighter future. Hope theory allows the leader to understand both what the term means and then how it can be instilled in their subordinates.

Hope Theory. Before providing the definition of *hope* (according to hope theory), it is important to see what it is not. Hope is not "fantasizing". Fantasizing focuses only on the positive achievement of a goal and ignores the potential obstacles, as well as the amount of effort and sacrifice needed to accomplish it. This feels good for the moment, but can lead to discouragement when adversity inevitably appears. Likewise, hope is not "dwelling". Dwelling is the opposite of fantasizing. It is an exclusive focus on the negative, the possibility of failure, and the obstacles themselves. Dwelling contributes to inaction, anxiety, and a paralyzing fear of failure.[13]

True hope combines the best of both. You imagine your ideal future, one you desire and are willing to work for, while simultaneously acknowledging the obstacles that stand in the way of its realization. According to Charles R. Snyder, hope is "A state of mind based on a time-tested degree of willpower (agency) and credible strategies (pathways), toward a goal."[14] Hope theory explains how both agency and pathways must be present in order for a high level of hope to exist. Agency without pathways is more like a wish.

Another way of looking at hope is through the lens of operational planning. For any operation, you must begin with the objective. This is our *goal*. Once the objective and the mission statement are clear, we have to assess if we have the assets available to accomplish it, followed by determining avenues of approach for actually getting to where we need to be. These are *pathways*. If we know what we need to do and how to accomplish it, the only question remaining is if the readiness level of the unit is sufficient for the task. This is *agency*.

It is important to emphasize that the experience we have in planning operations is sufficient for applying hope theory with our subordinates. You do not need to have a degree in counseling or psychology to help them clarify goals or think of new pathways for achieving them. You already have that which you need.

The challenge for leaders at all levels is to identify the loss of hope, or the presence of low hope, within their subordinates. When hope is lost, it is replaced by its opposite, which is *apathy*. Apathy is the point where the individual has given up trying to achieve their goals. It is the result of trained failure. Why try?

Hope theory shows that individuals who have lost hope end up exhibiting many of the destructive behaviors we often see in our most difficult Soldiers. Such behaviors result in disciplinary action, which in turn leads to a loss in readiness and reinforces the Soldier's expectation of failure. The use of hope theory is an attempt to stop this negative cycle.

Leadership & Hope. It is important to emphasize that there is nothing in hope theory or in the process of

instilling hope that is not already a part of good leadership. Gallup conducted a study asking respondents if their leaders inspired hope. Of those who responded in the affirmative, 69% were also "engaged in their work." Conversely, of those who responded in the negative, only 1% were so engaged![15]

Subordinates require hope (the sense that their future is a bright one, and they have multiple options to realizing it). If we are to maximize readiness in an environment where the contribution of every member is critical, we must be leaders of hope.

One last and important point concerns the reality of "external" sources of hope. Research shows that those with consistently low agency can still "learn" hope via the example of a leader. They discover how to look toward a brighter future by emulating their example. Leadership, exercised through the instilling of hope, is critical to the success of any organization.

Instilling Hope. If we identify our subordinate is struggling with goal setting, the process for assisting them involves the following two steps:

1. Identify: Everyone wants a brighter future, but not everyone can identify what it would take to make it a reality. Guide them through the process of visualizing what that future would look like from their perspective.

2. Specify: The challenge of step two is in translating this "vision" into concrete objectives (i.e. what, where, when). Finally, help them to break down these objectives into specific sub-steps or tasks, allowing them to see that their goal is really a collection of smaller and, ideally, more manageable ones.

The next challenge is in helping them to formulate a "plan of attack". In COA development, brainstorming can be used as a tool to help formulate options that otherwise might be overlooked. As a leader, you can facilitate this process with your subordinate. The task is made easier by your greater life and vocational experiences. Like goal setting, pathways can be sub-divided into smaller components. You can think of them as waypoints along the route to the goal that increase confidence as progress is more easily measured.

Now let's shift to a focus on pathways. We all know the value of having a "Plan B" in reserve in case our initial strategy encounters obstacles we cannot overcome. Hope is lost when an individual's one and only pathway becomes blocked by obstacles, making the goal appear unachievable.

Every pathway has obstacles. Some are easy to overcome, and some are not, but they are always present. Recognizing this is critical as it keeps us from becoming discouraged when we confront one. This is why fantasizing is so dangerous, as it does not factor in the presence of obstacles. Nothing worth achieving ever comes without a cost. This means the presence of obstacles along their pathway can be viewed as a positive, a sign that the goal is a worthy one and worth pursuing.

We rely on PACE plans to account for contingencies. The same process should be used when imagining pathways to our personal goals. Knowing we have multiple pathways ready and waiting keeps us from becoming discouraged when obstacles block our current path. Again, leaders can assist in the process of imagining pathways their subordinates are not aware of.

Of the three components of hope, agency is the most difficult to have a direct affect upon. Once we have helped our subordinate clarify their goals and how they can best go about achieving them, whether or not this results in a motivated pursuit rests with them alone. However, this does not mean we are without influence in this area.

In an earlier section there was a description of "external" hope, or the impact a high-hope individual, especially a leader, can have on others. As a leader, the most effective means at your disposal for increasing agency within your subordinate is to show that you have confidence in their ability to follow their pathways successfully. We can call this influence "external" confidence, confidence they learn from your example.

Conclusion

Suicide is the last act of a tragedy. When a Soldier takes their own life, it is likely because they have lost hope in a brighter future, believe they do not matter, or simply are unable to face the stress of transitioning into the unknown once again. Their tribal ties, within the family or their unit, are not strong enough to hold them up under their burden. However, these challenges face all of us, even if suicide is never considered as a viable option. When life becomes difficult, we all need a tribe to help us see beyond the stress and support us in the journey forward. This is especially powerful when that support can come from someone we admire and respect, a leader.

As leaders, we have the unique privilege of being in positions where our words and actions can make a significant impact on the lives of others. An unexpected word of appreciation can be enough to make a Soldier feel that they matter within their tribe. Providing counsel on future goals can give hope to someone who could previously see no way forward. Receiving a newcomer with enthusiasm and personal attention can help them integrate quickly into their new tribe, providing them with the community of support they need. All of these things are basic to leadership, and should come naturally. However, what makes them difficult is that they all require time. The intent of this material was to highlight how critical these things are to readiness, and by doing so, demonstrate that they are worth the time invested.

NOTES

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[11] Nancy K. Schlossberg, "Marginality and mattering: Key issues in building community," *Designing campus activities to foster a sense of community*, New Directions for Student Services, no. 48 (1989): 3.
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