Team-Building Lessons Learned and Best Practices



By Master Sergeant Russell E. Gehrlein (Retired)

The concept of **People First** has been a focus of the U.S. Army; the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command; the Maneuver Support Center of Excellence; and the U.S. Army Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear School (USACBRNS) for several years now. However, taking care of Soldiers and accomplishing the mission at the same time has always been a challenge—especially when the mission puts Soldiers at risk.

This article does not summarize the ways in which the Army has changed how it currently takes care of Soldiers; rather, it provides a means for me to share some of the ways that I have been putting my people first. This is a follow-up to an article that I wrote for the Winter 2019 issue of the *Army Chemical Review*.[1]

For those who do not know me, I am a Department of the Army civilian, serving as the operations officer for USACBRNS, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri—a position that I have held for 15 years. I also worked in operations for 13 of my 20 years as a Regular Army Soldier. Since I wrote the Winter 2019 article,[2] 33 officers and noncommissioned officers have been members of my team. Moreover, I have worked for a total of 15 leaders (from chief of staff to commandant). Each of these people has impacted me. As a result, I would like to share some helpful team-building lessons learned and best practices that have made my teams successful. My intent is to help military and Department of the Army civilian leaders more effectively build their own teams.

Giving the Greeting of the Day

Giving the greeting of the day is a very simple, yet effective way that all team leaders can do better. A while back, as I was walking down the hallway, I passed a sergeant major whom I did not know. I greeted him with, "Good morning, sergeant major!" He responded in kind. That felt good. I thought about how important this military tradition is to building a culture of dignity and respect in the workplace.

Greeting our coworkers is even more important than greeting those whom we do not know. An exchange of "Good morning" between teammates is a great way to begin a conversation. It may lead to asking, "How are you doing?" or stating, "I haven't seen you in a while. How are the kids/grandkids/wife?" It can open up doors for showing compassionate leadership. When we consistently greet our bosses, peers, and subordinates, our connections deepen, and we have more opportunities to offer help, if needed.

Treating Team Members with Dignity and Respect

Treating team members with dignity and respect may be the most important aspect of team building. Most Soldiers and Department of the Army civilians can talk about dignity and respect, but it is more difficult to "walk the walk" with the team every day. Treating all personnel, regardless of their demographic, with dignity and respect has been constantly reinforced for centralized promotion and command select boards as well as for civilian hiring actions and promotions at every level of the military. I believe that our strength lies in our unity of purpose amidst great diversity. Every member of the team brings something positive to the table based on who they are and where they come from.

When I present an orientation briefing to new members of our section, I make certain that they understand that this office will always be a safe place to work. Neither sexual harassment nor racial discrimination will ever be tolerated. Despite our differences, we will all strive to get along and work as a team to accomplish the mission of supporting the Chemical Corps, regardless of race, gender, component, rank, age, or any other category. The same applies even with team members who are not chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) Soldiers.

How do we treat those who are different from us with dignity and respect? We notice them. We say, "Please" and "Thank you." We praise in public and correct in private. We ask questions and we really listen to the answers in order to get to know our teammates. Personally, I remind my teammates on a daily basis that they are appreciated and that they are valued members of the team. I am intentional in my actions to ensure that every member of the team is treated like Family. I monitor my relationships with each team member as well as manage the relationships that each team member has with the others on the team.

Showing Respect to Others Outside the Organization

On my first tour in Korea, I was assigned to a military police company, where I witnessed a classic example of an individual conveying disrespect to someone at our higher headquarters whom I did not know. My company commander always referred to the battalion operations officer as "Major Problems." I was fairly certain that the rank of the battalion operations officer was that of major; however, I'm pretty sure that "Problems" wasn't really his last name.

Disrespect is cancerous. It starts out small and then spreads to others—both inside and outside of an organization. If tolerated, it becomes a new standard that eventually destroys everything in its path. And, as one of my coworkers stated, we tend to remember negative things better than we remember positive ones.

Allowing yourself or your employees to make jokes about, or otherwise disrespect, leaders or staff members from other organizations with which you work (whether above or below you) may come back to bite you. Even though expressing your frustration and voicing how much you despise them may seem to unite your team, that can actually be counterproductive and can destroy the quality teamwork that you are trying to develop. It would be hypocritical to emphasize the concept of treating others with dignity and respect and then do the exact opposite with regard to folks who happen to work upstairs or down the street. Furthermore, getting transferred to another office and finding out that the new team with which you will be working with has heard that you have been bad-mouthing them makes for a bad situation.

Managing Team Relationships

In my view, my job as a supervisor is not only to manage the people on my team but also their relationships. This is a business application of a mathematical concept called "combinatorial theory." Without going into the details of the formula used to calculate the number of distinct relationships on a team of any size, as I did in my previous article,[3] I offer some examples. With five team members, there are a total of 10 relationships because there are four people with whom each of the five members must work; however, it is not necessary to count the relationships twice. (The relationship between Sergeant Jones and First Lieutenant Smith is the same relationship as that between First Lieutenant Smith and Sergeant Jones.) Using the same logic, if there are seven members on a team, then there are a total of 21 relationships.

As a team leader, you must understand that everyone on your team is connected not only to you but also to each other. Every relationship among team members is important and needs to be managed by the leader. The chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Team leaders are responsible for constantly assessing; correcting, as needed; and seeking to improve the relationships between each of the team members—not merely their own relationships with the other members of the team.

Developing Personal Relationships

I have been intentional and consistent in developing my employees. I set high standards, and I enforce them. I get my employees to think, feel, and act the way that I would in certain situations. I train them on skills they may lack. I thank them for their efforts and help them improve, when needed. I take a genuine interest in them, their Families, and their military careers beyond their current assignments.

When my employees depart, they leave knowing that they made a difference. Whether they are moving to their next



duty station or leaving the Army, they know what "right looks like." Perhaps they can make a difference in their next assignment by passing on some of the lessons they learned about how to treat folks with dignity and respect while they were under my leadership.

In the words of an officer who worked on my team for 5 months, "Work isn't so bad if you build yourself a home around it. And you certainly have created a home here—not just for yourself, but for others like me, longing to be accepted, appreciated, and acknowledged." More recently, a senior noncommissioned officer who has since been transferred expressed gratitude for treating him like Family.

Conclusion: Closing With a Challenge

I encourage you, as team leaders, to take a hard look at how you function as leaders, no matter how big the organization you lead. You may manage a team of teams. Ask yourself: Can we do better?

I trust that some of my insights will be helpful and will enable you hard-working team leaders at every level to be more successful in completing your unending and thankless jobs. Know this: Your work in building and leading teams truly matters to the to the Corps and the Army!

Endnotes:

[1]Russell E. Gehrlein, "Operations Lessons Learned and Best Practices," *Army Chemical Review*, Winter 2019.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

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