Communication, Confidence, Downtime, Stability of Personal Life, and Unit Cohesion

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Communication

However often the importance of communication up and down the chain of command is emphasized in leadership courses, faulty communication remains one of the root causes of poor performance in units. As Marines prepare to fight in ever smaller and more dispersed units, effective communication throughout command levels becomes all the more important if everyone is to know what is expected of him and what is his commander’s intent. More and more missions are being influenced by political, economic, diplomatic, and sociological factors to which the individual rifleman is exposed daily. Your role, as his leader, is to explain his mission and its ground rules, especially the rules of engagement, in terms he can understand.

Communication provides your Marine with the knowledge he needs to make tactical decisions. Effective communication also plays a major role in maintaining good morale. It helps keep rumors in check and, thereby, reduces unit and individual anxiety. And the information you convey to your Marine helps him believe that he still has a base of knowledge with which he can make decisions and take action that give him some sense of control over his safety and survivability, even in the most dangerous of circumstances. Preserving that belief is an important defense against overwhelming fear and combat-induced psychiatric illness.

Confidence

A person facing danger must have confidence in himself, his peers, his leaders, and his personal weapon.

No factor is more important than self-confidence in promoting combat performance and preventing combat-related psychiatric disorders. The infantryman who lacks self-confidence may endanger himself and others through delay in decision-making and timidity in action. He is unlikely to dare, when daring may be necessary. And when the battle is over and he thinks back on his actions, doubts about his performance will plant the seeds for later psychiatric illness. Confidence in one’s self is the result of training and experience. Few factors are as important to self-confidence on the eve of battle than the realization that one has trained well for it and has the necessary physical skills and endurance to function under demanding circumstances. The training you give your Marines must be as much, as hard, and as realistic as you can possibly make it. Anything that interferes with that training will rob your Marines of a precious ingredient in their self-confidence. One type of training that should not be overlooked is well-practiced self-defense and hand-to-hand combat; anyone who faces physical danger should have these skills, and the confidence that goes with them. Self-confidence, especially in the young
Marine about to enter combat for the first time, expresses itself in his perception of his ability to perform up to expectations and not let his buddies down. He will be afraid. Do not hesitate to talk about fear and its prevalence in a unit before battle; reassure him that fear is not unique to him, indicative of lack of courage, or predictive of poor performance.

Under normal circumstances, a man judges another, whether peer or leader, by a variety of criteria. In combat, however, the two most important criteria are competence and reliability. Does a man know his job well? Can he be counted on to do it, regardless of the circumstances and dangers? If the answer to both questions is "yes," that man has the trust of those around him. At every opportunity in your association with your Marines from the very first moment you meet them, you must establish your competence and reliability above all else.

Confidence in one’s weapon is the result of sufficient familiarity with it to know that it will function under the stresses of the weather and environment that are present at the site of battle, that malfunctions can be corrected rapidly, that one can use it skillfully and effectively, and that it will do the job for which it is issued.

**Downtime and Boredom**

However exciting or important a mission, there will always be downtime and the risk of boredom. This is particularly true when your Marines believe they have accomplished the mission for which they were sent, yet still find themselves on site and away from their families. Under these conditions, performance can deteriorate, sloppiness can create hazards, and hostility can set in. Productive use of downtime can prevent these from happening.

Sending your men on R&R, or providing them with opportunity for sleep and recreation, are certainly good uses of downtime, if circumstances permit. Creating useful tasks with realistic goals and ways of measuring progress in meeting them is another use.

An additional use to which downtime can be put is training.

One form of training that is especially important is advanced first-aid. No person should go into combat with only a familiarity with fundamental, elementary first-aid. Proficiency in initial wound management and patient stabilization is essential. You should not assume that your corpsman will be around when you need him; he may be your first casualty. Use predeployment opportunities to work out ways with your unit’s medical officer for you and your Marines to acquire advanced medical skills and knowledge, and use downtime during deployments as an opportunity to review and advance this training. If medical knowledge is acquired through pre-deployment training programs set up at local hospital emergency rooms or through ride-alongs with local emergency medical service units, Marines who participate will encounter, perhaps for the first time in their lives, patients with extensive and disfiguring wounds. In the process of learning about patient
care, Marines will adjust to the visual impact of this carnage and may not become
distracted when they see it on the battlefield.

Regardless of how you fill downtime, remind your Marines during it that they are
members of a unit that cares about them, and constantly demonstrate that care with
attention to chow, mail, and their security.

Age and Stability of Personal Life

As our forces become more populated with men and women who have family
responsibilities, the small-unit leader would be well advised to ensure that major
outstanding personal problems of his Marines are large resolved, if at all possible, before
the battle gets underway. Failure to do so may result in increased numbers of persons
with combat-induced psychiatric disorders. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) found that
in their 1982 Lebanon war, the fewest number of cases of these disorders occurred in 18-
21 year-old soldiers who had no family responsibilities, whereas the highest number of
cases were in 26-30 year-olds with their greater family concerns, and in those with
current or recent problems in their families and marriages.

Sense of Bonding, Unit Cohesion, and Loyalty

Men perform well and courageously on the battlefield primarily because of their loyalty
to the men immediately around them, and not because of loyalty to any larger
organizational unit. Anything that weakens this cohesion at the small-unit level will
threaten the resolve of those men to perform to their maximum in battle.

If a mission goes badly, is perceived to have been poorly planned, or is thought to have
been unnecessary, and if casualties result, survivors will engage in scapegoating and
become at risk for later psychiatric disorders as they remember their losses. Bonding, unit
cohesion, and loyalty provide a different perspective on these losses: whether a mission is
justified or not, or well or poorly planned and executed, men in war fight and die not for
the mission but for each other. That perspective may recast the grief of survivors and help
reduce their chances for later becoming psychiatric casualties.