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Growing Soldiers

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Soldiers—the United States Army’s most precious asset. We all know that without soldiers, no piece of equipment is worth its weight in dirt. How then, do we safeguard these assets? Leaders often overuse the phrase “taking care of soldiers,” because it seems like the right thing to say and you can’t go wrong by saying it. Anyone who lives the creed of taking care of soldiers can attest to the fact that it’s a much harder and more different thing to do than to say.

No soldier comes into the Army to fail. Everyone wants to be a success. Why then, do the headlines in the military newspapers seem to always accentuate the negative? Because the negative stories are out of the ordinary. Why do people gossip about the negative things soldiers do? Because it’s not normal for soldiers to do the wrong things.

Leaders who have spent, and continue to spend, the majority of their time *with* soldiers have no greater reward than to observe their soldiers’ success. Few need any greater reward. I have found that although there are

facets of a professional soldier’s career that are technical, and require volumes of doctrinal material to execute, caring for and “growing” soldiers isn’t. I have found that there are a few tenets that are necessary to “grow” soldiers:

See the positive/Be the positive: When dealing with young soldiers, always attempt to be positive. When a positive environment is fostered, positive results usually follow. Most leaders know if a soldier is not putting forth the effort required to succeed. At the same time a *good* leader can tell when a soldier is failing to meet a standard because he or she is incapable, or when he or she hasn’t had the proper training and motivation. When leaders use the word “*we*” instead of “*you*” or “*I*” those leaders show the soldier there is only one team, and he or she is part of it.

Set the standard/Live the standard: There is but one standard—the *Army* standard. It is a benchmark of what all soldiers must accomplish. In soldier development it is necessary for soldiers to understand what a *standard* is, what a *goal* is and the difference between the two.

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More importantly, when leaders show they always meet the standard and are not content until their personal goals are met, those leaders are embedding that same outstanding quality into the soldiers they influence.

Love your soldiers/Discipline your soldiers: Love your soldiers. Is this too strong a word? Not at all. Leaders who know their soldiers trust their very lives and well-being to them, can't help but love them. Leaders may not always like every one of their soldiers, but by loving them, the leaders will ensure that they are trained and ready for whatever calls may come.

Disciplining a soldier is an art. Too many leaders confuse discipline with punishment. Whenever leaders train, teach, coach or correct, they are disciplining their soldiers. Any professional soldier can judge whether a soldier is disciplined after about 30 seconds of conversation.

Values and Ethical Behavior: Ethical behavior is nothing more than doing what is right. This is a very simple statement for something that is

not easily accomplished. Does this mean that a leader never makes mistakes? Absolutely not. But leaders at all levels must be consistently conscious of the fact that impressionable young soldiers see what leaders do much more than they hear what those leaders say. The Army leadership has provided tangible guidance on what professional values are. This, coupled with ethical behavior, is the cornerstone upon which young soldiers build their professional lives.

It would be presumptuous to think this is everything a leader must know and do. A good leader knows positive leadership isn't issued with diplomas or promotions—it is cultured over an entire career. Equipment comes and goes. Technology changes constantly. Boundaries on maps ebb and flow, whether by diplomatic or military actions. The one constant throughout our history is the American soldier. Growing soldiers is a leader responsibility that spans the generations of our profession. True leaders recognize true honor. I can think of no higher honor than that a soldier remembered me as *his leader*.