



PERSPECTIVE ON LEADERSHIP: RESPONDING TO EVENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

This leader's guide examines how leaders can address events in Afghanistan with their Soldiers.

Focusing Attention

For many Soldiers, the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, pictures of the Taliban in the streets, and the scenes at the airport in Kabul may evoke some strong emotions. These Soldiers—particularly those Soldiers who served in Afghanistan—may reflect on what these events mean for their own service. As leaders, it can be useful to consider what your troops might be going through and to consider your own reactions as well.

Soldiers may be...

- wondering how to place their own service into perspective, and how to differentiate their efforts from the events currently unfolding
- asking themselves whether the stress and risk of deployment and burden on their own families was worth the cost
- remembering the Soldiers and friends who were lost
- thinking that the situation is evolving much as they suspected it might
- considering the impact of current events on the US's reputation as a global leader
- worrying about leaving supporters of the US efforts behind
- feeling relieved that the deployments to Afghanistan are over

Listening to Your Soldiers

In order to help put the experience of Soldiers into perspective, consider initiating a dialogue. As a leader, you can set the parameters for the conversation and help your Soldiers make sense of their experience. Here are some reminders about how to do that:

- Ask.** Reach out and ask how your Soldiers are doing. You don't have to wait for them to check in with you.
- Acknowledge their experience.** If they are upset, acknowledge their emotions. Listen actively so you can paraphrase what they are saying and describe the emotion you are hearing to confirm you understand.
- Acknowledge your own feelings.** Acknowledging your own feelings can help make sure you are taking care of yourself and be a helpful reality check for others.
- Look out for one another.** Soldiers who have strong emotions may need some additional support. Consider whether to reach out to the chaplain and behavioral health providers for consultation.

Tracking Emotions

Soldiers may be experiencing a range of emotions and more than one emotion at the same time. These emotions may include...

- Anger
- Frustration
- Worry/Anxiety
- Discouragement
- Disgust
- Grief
- Sadness
- Helplessness
- Pride
- Gratitude
- Apathy
- Relief

Providing Perspective

Leaders at all levels are essential for establishing the meaning of a Soldier's service and sacrifice. How you respond, and how you choose to frame the experience, matters. You can help Soldiers by reminding them of the significance of their efforts.

- Service.** Soldiers are professionals who accomplished what they were asked to do. Their service is distinct from—not defined by—what is currently happening.
- Supporting Teammates.** Soldiers were there alongside their teammates, looking out for their battle buddies.
- Combating terrorism.** Since the war began, there have been no major terrorist attacks on US soil. Soldiers were part of the team that successfully reduced the risk of a major post-9/11 terrorist attack.
- Investing in the next generation.** Soldiers enabled an entire generation of Afghans to grow up in a freer society, one allowing broader access to education, employment, and information. These societal changes may create a foundation that positively influences Afghanistan's future.

Frequently Asked Questions

- **What about casualties?** If you have connections to people who were seriously injured or died in Afghanistan, consider reaching out. They may be questioning their sacrifice, and your outreach may help them know that you are thinking of them and that you value their service.
- **What about Soldiers who did not deploy?** Even Soldiers who did not deploy to Afghanistan may have strong reactions to recent events. These conversations do not need to be limited to veterans of Afghanistan.
- **What if I didn't deploy?** Many of today's leaders did not deploy to Afghanistan. This is an opportunity for you to reach out to your troops who did and make a connection when they may be feeling like no one understands their experience. Remember your primary task is to listen.
- **Are there other ways to help?** Consider reaching out to organizations that support veterans or the adjustment of refugees from Afghanistan.
- **What impact can I have?** Many studies document the link between what leaders chose to emphasize and how Soldiers manage stress and understand the meaning of their service. When leaders encourage and educate unit members, acknowledge and normalize stressors, and lead by example, Soldiers adapt better.



As a Leader, How Will You Frame Your Soldiers' Experience?