US Army War College

USAWC Press

5-16-2014

Op-Ed: Changing the Army's Culture of Cultural Change

Leonard Wong

Op-Ed: Changing the Army's Culture of Cultural Change

May 16, 2014 | Dr. Leonard Wong

In a profession as large as the U.S. Army, trying to influence the way organizational members think about specific issues can be a vexing proposition. Certainly new systems, policies, and procedures can force changes in behavior, but often what senior decisionmakers truly desire is a shift in attitudes—a culture change across the entire Army. Recent calls for Army culture change have emerged in areas as diverse as cyber security, resilience, sexual assault, leader development, language proficiency, and even energy conservation. Interestingly, the varied attempts at changing the Army's culture over the past years seem to follow an amazingly similar template.

Usually the first order of business is establishing within the force that the subject of change deserves our full attention and respect. This is accomplished simply by capitalizing all nouns associated with the topic. So, "soldier" becomes *Soldier*, "families" become *Families*, "civilians" become *Civilians*, and so on. A more recent example of this technique is the conversion of the somewhat insipid lower case phrase "land power" to the more persuasive and potent term *Landpower*. Of course, the downside to this approach is the tendency of anyone outside the Army to view us as grammatically uninformed.

The necessity of change is often further reinforced by prominently featuring the topic in a "Stand-To" email which—with a single press of the "Send" button—is instantaneously delivered to literally tens of thousands of Deleted Items folders throughout the force. Another technique that is occasionally used to garner additional attention to the topic involves modifying the policies on the wear of the uniform. Because the military uniform is a subtle reflection of an underlying service culture, altering uniform policies can send a strong message about change. Clearly correlating the change in the uniform policy with the desired culture change, however, may prove to be difficult and sometimes subject to

misinterpretation.

Of course, any campaign to get people talking about an issue must include setting aside a specific week for festivities and programs dedicated to the topic. Adding this small detail to the culture change template will invariably result in noticeably heightened awareness in organizational members. Finally, the Army usually demonstrates that it is fully committed to implementing lasting change by standing up a "Center of Excellence." The role of the Center of Excellence is to intensely study the topic from all angles and then—through the use of comprehensive surveys, focus groups, and a Blue Ribbon Panel—deliver recommendations for additional words to capitalize. The critical feature of the Center of Excellence strategy is that it allows all other Centers of Mediocrity to absolve themselves of any ownership or accountability for the desired cultural change.

Once the force realizes that the Army is serious about change, the next step is to demonstrate that the source of the culture change is not a group of disconnected, out-of touch, senior decisionmakers bent on forcing their ideas downward. Instead, the change must be portrayed as a grassroots movement involving ordinary people just like the rest of us. This is best accomplished by fielding a flashy interactive website—preferably with a ".com," not ".army.mil" domain name—that features soldiers with nice complexions and straight teeth telling us why the topic is essential to the Army. To give the aura of interactivity, the website must have the following social media icons: The icons need only be present, not necessarily functional or even understood.

To push culture change even further, specific actions are taken to get the masses behind the change. First, individuals are sent off to schools to become "Master" certified in the subject. Although achieving Master level certification in other fields and professions may take years of supervised practice, Master certifications associated with Army culture change can be obtained in as little as 2 weeks. This is a minor point since the primary goal of getting people Master certified is to provide an easily-briefed metric of progress. Speaking of metrics, the gold standard for any culture change effort is inserting the subject into Army Regulation (AR) 350-1. This is not as difficult as it sounds because the long list of AR 350-1 directed training is always open to new topics. What is difficult—or rather impossible—is removing a topic from the list. Because AR 350-1 training is occasionally a burden for time-stressed units, deliberate care should be taken to keep the training shallow and superficial. A proven strategy is to ask only inane questions requiring scant knowledge in order to obtain the much desired certificate of completion.

The typical Army culture change template is a timeworn approach that is simple, predictable, and easily replicable. More importantly, experience shows that the template is attractive to most senior decisionmakers looking for rapid culture change. While slick strategic communications and additional mandatory training requirements can raise awareness of an issue, however, such efforts often result instead in higher levels of callousness, cynicism, and eventual disdain toward the topic—the complete opposite of what real culture change is intended to be. The quick fix culture change template, more often than not, teaches us how to be good hypocrites. We learn all the right buzzwords, all the right slogans, and all the right multiple choice answers, but our attitudes and actions remain immovable.

Real culture change, unfortunately, is not so easily attained. Real culture change is achieved by selectively applying effort and resources to key pressure points in the Army institution. The starting point for real culture change is realizing that too much of anything dilutes the effort. Turning every issue into a top priority makes it impossible to establish what is truly important. If the Army desires real culture change, it must first isolate those vital values and beliefs it wants to promulgate and then shift resources and attention accordingly. Once restraint is restored, it is critical to recognize that it is impractical to persuade and convince everyone down to the most cynical underling to support culture change. Instead, change should be focused on those who hold the most influence in the organization—the leaders.

The Army has an advantage over most large organizations in that organizational members tend to emulate the most successful leaders. As respected leaders become believers and backers of culture change, the rest of the force will observe and do likewise. While leveraging this unique role of leaders to transform the Army is a gradual and often time consuming process, it also results in substantial, not superficial change.

Leaders become advocates for culture change not through droning lectures, stacks of dull PowerPoint slides, or mindless online training. Instead, they develop an evangelistic fervor when personally exposed to the urgency and seriousness of the needed culture change. The culture change becomes more than an ancillary concern when leaders, especially those at the senior level, get intimately involved in an issue. The recent dramatic shift in attitudes concerning PTSD and TBI is a good example of a correction in culture facilitated by the engaged and focused attention of leaders who have been convinced of the necessity of change.

Finally, it should be noted that the force is savvy enough to discern whether or not their leadership truly believes an issue is important. They get the message when a senior leader clears the calendar enough to personally sit through 2 days of a conference or training devoted to the topic of change. Likewise, they notice when a senior leader relinquishes responsibility to a staff representative and then makes only a cameo appearance because there are more pressing things to attend to.

   Culture change will always be a critical facet in the strategic leadership of the Army. But culture change is not accomplished by treating it as a staff action. Culture change cannot be delegated. Real culture change—the type that transforms not just behavior, but also underlying beliefs and values—is transmitted via the actions of leadership. The irony is that we already knew this. We have just become so accustomed to the online courses, the glossy brochures, and the prolific propaganda machine of big Army that we have forgotten the vital role of leadership in culture change. And that is something that we need to change.

*****

*****