



# The Army Family

by CPT Lance Brender

People often say that the Army is a family. The men and women we serve with are our brothers- and sisters-in-arms. Sometimes the bonds we build with them can be as strong, if not stronger, than the bonds we have with our biological families. Feeling this way is not surprising, considering how long and how closely Soldiers work together, especially when serving in combat together.

The dynamics of an Army unit are strikingly similar to a traditional family. There are parent figures and sibling roles. When leaders learn to recognize a unit's "family" dynamics, they can improve the unit's effectiveness and be better leaders themselves.

Units, like families, can demonstrate both functional and dysfunctional characteristics. For example, traditional families live together, face challenges, meet with victories and defeats, integrate new members, grieve or farewell lost ones, strive and come together. They also choose to deal with these life changes in either constructive, mission-focused (functional) or destructive, non-effectual (dysfunctional) ways. The effects of dysfunction on a unit's bottom line – accomplishing the mission and taking care of Soldiers – have a direct impact on its squads, platoons, companies or battalions. Conversely, a functional unit makes its Soldiers more resilient and bolder, and directly improves mission accomplishment.

## Background

The terms "functional" and "dysfunctional" are elements of personality psychology. Prominent contributors to the field include Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, and Jean-Martin Charcot. Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century researchers in humanistic psychology, such as Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and Gordon Allport, furthered these concepts into socio-analytic theory, which has largely influenced Western psychological theory for the last 70 years.<sup>1</sup> The forms of dysfunction are:

- Addiction;
- Control;
- Unpredictability and fear;

- Conflict;
- Abuse;
- Perfectionism;
- Poor communication; and
- Lack of diversity.<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, the forms of functionality are:

- Expression of the five freedoms (power to perceive; to think and interpret; to emote; to choose, want and desire; and to be creative through the use of imagination);
- Clear and consistent communication;
- Negotiated differences;
- Unfolding process of intimacy;
- Trusting;
- Individuality;
- Openness and flexibility;
- Fulfillment of needs;
- Accountability; and
- Open and flexible rules.<sup>3</sup>

I focus on three aspects of both dysfunction and function that I believe will be most helpful to leaders creating an effective command climate in their unit. The three dysfunctional traits are poor communication, conflict and abuse, and the three functional traits are trust, accountability and fulfillment of needs.

## Dysfunctional unit

Many people have experienced a bad unit. Soldiers know when they are in one when they dread getting up for pivotal response training in the morning, hate the idea of seeing their coworkers or walk into an evaluation report counseling not having a clue what the boss is going to say to them.

The dysfunctional unit does not really know anything about its members and does not care to find out. It is not interested in reconsidering any preconceived notions about its people. It exploits the weaknesses of its members out of spite or a desire to get ahead. It gossips, mocks and plots. Soldiers and leaders do

not trust one another. The dysfunctional unit performs poorly both in garrison and combat. Permanent-change-of-station orders can never come soon enough in this type of unit.

**Poor communication.** The Army talks a lot about communication, of which it has the technical aspect down to a science. It has telecommunications systems that can talk, share graphics and transmit data across the globe. It has the operations order to deliver a quick and concise tactical plan to subordinates and military personnel, and all-Army-activities messages to disseminate administrative information to the entire Army. Dysfunctional units, like families, fail not because they cannot talk but because they cannot send a good message.

The dysfunctional unit will likely participate in biweekly command and staff meetings, have weekly training meetings and hold daily leader huddles, much like a dysfunctional family may attend community gatherings, go to church and eat dinners together. These things are not bad, but the dysfunction is in what they say. One example might be the subordinates the leader chooses to address.

The dysfunctional unit will call a meeting and not invite or enforce the habitual attendance of all key members. This fractures the unit by alienating the absent party and implying to the regular attendees that either their absent comrades are above the law or are not worthy of consideration. Either case erodes the unit's cohesion.<sup>4</sup>

What the dysfunctional unit talks about is not any better. The unit may make generalizations of one company, platoon or squad, either favorably or unfavorably, regardless of current or overall performance. This commander, like a parent with favorite and problem children, will speak on preconceived, and often incorrect, notions of who each unit is – what each is capable of and what each is worth. This immediately reinforces in the minds of the participants who is “in” with the commander and who is “out.”

The dysfunctional unit then reinforces failure when the commander, having his preconceived notions, dismisses or minimizes the thoughts and abilities of those he sees as his “screw-up” subordinate leaders while overlooking excesses from those he labels in his head as squared away. This double standard fractures the unit and quickly turns a functioning Army organization into an in-fighting, destructively competitive, less effective group.

Communicative dysfunction culminates in how subordinate leaders, like children talking to their parents, push information back up to the leader. These dysfunctional subordinate leaders will naturally fall into a survival role as they try to succeed with their commander. The subordinate may assume the “hero” role if the leader is lacking confidence, and tell him how an operation is going to run, overriding the commander's plan. Another subordinate may be the “lost child,” that junior leader who is often considered ineffectual or leading an inconsequential group, who will have his legitimate needs or genuinely good ideas dismissed. Still a third subordinate may be the “scapegoat” who points out the unit's flaws but, in the commander's mind, is clearly the source of the problems. Peers and subordinates quickly identify this last type as an easy and legitimate target for derision, undermining his leadership ability and degrading the unit.

**Conflict.** Conflict within a unit can sometimes be more destructive than contact with the enemy. Consider the example of parents fighting in an unhappy home. Parents' open fights or concealed arguments are obvious to children and affect the

whole family. Conflict like this has direct parallels to the military.

How many Soldiers have served in units where “mom and dad” (battalion commander and S-3, company commander and executive officer, platoon leader and platoon sergeant) clearly did not agree? The conflict between the two makes subordinates choose who to give their loyalty to – and the one with the higher rank does not always win.

Like children in a broken household, Soldiers will most likely give the appearance of loyalty to both parties but will throw their heartfelt support behind whichever leader they feel will take better care of them or protect them when problems arise. Obviously, this deeply divides a unit. Clear “us vs. them” delineation arises between those who choose to be loyal to one leader or another, sowing dissention within the unit.

Another example of conflict is among peers. Peer conflict can be the result of jealousy and arrogance, much like it can be among siblings. Peers in a unit largely do the same or similar tasks and often for the same boss. In the case of a dysfunctional family, children who perceive themselves as filling similar niches within the family will try to outdo each other. More nefariously, they try to sabotage the other to make themselves look better and receive recognition from a parent.

Similarly, the dysfunctional unit becomes cutthroat and provides an environment seemingly designed for destructive competition. Everything from order-of-merit lists to evaluation reports codifies and reinforces the concept that people's worth is relative and capable of reducing to a rank-ordered number. This gives a clear incentive, like career advancement, for peers to do everything in their power to appear superior to their comrades.

The dysfunctional unit sees peers fighting openly or scheming covertly, searching for ways to try to impress others or prove their dominance, exposing and capitalizing on the weaknesses of their fellows to the detriment of the unit. This unit suffers from poor morale and low readiness ratings, and may experience a higher risk of suicide. Some will argue that a culture of fierce competition helps a unit by encouraging individuals to strive against their peers for success; this is competition gone awry. The best units are not those with one stellar performer and his vanquished competitors; rather, the highest performing units are those with all their Soldiers contributing to mission success through the genuine support of their peers, leaders and subordinates.

**Abuse.** The term “abuse” is overused in modern society. However, abuse within the Army, like within families, is very real. Abuse in a family setting more often passes from parent to child and is more often psychological than physical. Weak parents bolster their natural leadership positions through abusing their authority and withholding affection, support or other benefits. An example of this in a dysfunctional unit would be a weak command team. When a dysfunctional unit leader is emotionally unsound or feels psychologically threatened (such as by a more impressive subordinate leader, a non-conformist black sheep or someone they feel lessens their prestige), he reacts abusively.

As in a family, leader abuse is usually not physical. Dysfunctional leaders more often punish those they resent or feel threatened by with the Army versions of withheld affection (not praising, not submitting for awards, giving poor evaluation reports, not greeting in public) and hostility (criticism, derision in private and in front of subordinates, gossip, seeking out excuses for official discipline). This dysfunction is particularly destructive to a unit as subordinates not only attempt to avoid the brunt

of the leader's abuse, but also begin to justify the leader's poor behavior.

Career Soldiers sometimes say that "ass-chewings don't matter" and that an explosive or degrading session with a superior is nothing to them. This is not true. If "ass-chewings" do not matter, why do they work so well? Except in the case of Soldiers (or children) who have completely given up, a verbal lashing will at least get most people to *try* to appease their boss. However, punishment automatically inspires anger and resentment in the recipient. Justified or not, punishment makes people feel adversarial to the one administering the punishment. Moreover, as most leaders know as both the giver and receiver of diatribes, exploding at a subordinate is at best a flawed leadership tool.

Indeed, if a leader is famous for losing control of himself, his subordinates will react in one of two ways. The more self-confident group will lose respect for the intemperate leader as one who lacks control, is insecure and lacks respect for his subordinates. The less self-confident group will internalize the leader's anger and will inevitably deal with the internal conflict (cognitive dissonance) of their situation by either concluding that they really *are* worthless or by excusing the leader's abuse as being a good thing. An example of the latter would be a leader who constantly explodes over the smallest infractions, threatens people with physical or career harm, or derides them publicly; yet this Soldier is passes as a "hard leader" or someone who just wants to make the unit better. This manner of excusing abusive leader behavior is exactly like children excusing their degrading parents and is just as reprehensible.

## Functional unit

People who have been in a good unit know it is good. They feel great coming to work each day, feel confident about rolling out on a patrol and go on to speak about the days they were in that unit as some of the best times of their life. This is a place where they are familiar with the people they work with and know that every Soldier there has their back. The friendships they make there will pay dividends over a lifetime.

There they are not only accepted but also praised for being themselves. There is genuine respect for their accomplishments and efforts and appreciation for their character. They receive consistent recognition for their hard work and have no doubt the boss regards them fairly and is going to take care of them. Their leadership encourages them through setbacks and tough times. This unit is a strong performer and conducts itself well in garrison and combat. This is the kind of place Soldiers never want to leave.

**Trust.** Good units, like good families, are built on trust. Just like children, growing up and taking on roles of increasing responsibility, Soldiers rely on the assumption they have the trust of their leaders. Moreover, this trust is not false trust that is on the lookout for failure, but genuine trust that the Soldier is seeking to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do and maintains that trust until proven wrong.

Trust allows the subordinate the freedom of action to accomplish his tasks as best as he can. Soldiers, like children, constantly find themselves in new situations that require creative adaptation. This is only more intense for leaders. Even in garrison, leaders get a rapid turnover of Soldiers and a new boss every one or two years. They PCS every three years and get a new job at often unexpected times. In combat, change is constant as the tactical situation develops.

This rapid change demands that Soldiers make immediate, important decisions without necessarily knowing what "right" answer their boss is looking for. This is where the assurance of a leader's trust becomes imperative. The functional unit's leader trusts that his subordinate is disciplined, resourceful, honorable and performing as best as he knows how. This assurance of trust opens up a world of possibilities for the subordinate to surprise his leader with the inventive and effective ways he will solve problems.

It also reinforces the subordinate's confidence in his ability to make the right choice, even when the situation is ambiguous. The functional unit's Soldiers and leaders are not worrying about what the boss is looking for or if they are making the choice that will please him. They do not act confident because they are born studs, but because their leader has clearly and genuinely set the tone in his unit that subordinates have his trust and as long as they can justify their actions when called to accountability. Now, this does not mean that people will not make mistakes or even fail. Rather, it means that even with mistakes and failure, the leader makes clear to the subordinate that he knows his subordinate's successes, mistakes and failures were in pursuit of the right ends for the right reasons. This level of trust and encouragement galvanizes the subordinate's faith in his own decision-making ability and gives him the confidence to accomplish his leader's intent.

Observing trust in a functional unit unveils a truth that Army leaders often ignore: it must be given before it can be earned. The functional unit emplaces trust in its members and gives them opportunities to justify this trust. The best leaders then exploit the displayed abilities of their Soldiers through appropriate praise, tough assignments and increasing levels of responsibility. Dysfunctional units assume their members will fail and create situations to try to find failure. Not surprisingly, failure is what they often find.

Functional leaders give those in their charge the benefit of the doubt in uncertain situations and take back that trust only when their subordinates clearly show fundamental character flaws (i.e., impediments to doing being able to do the right thing, like integrity violations). If a unit does not have the time or resources to rehabilitate a fundamental character flaw, the functional leader will reclaim the trust he placed in his subordinate and remove him from his position to protect the rest of the unit.

**Accountability.** Accountability in a functional unit is the fair and universal acknowledgment of and consequences for transgressions. In a family, it is important for every member to see that every other member is held to the same standard in light of the situation and that the standard is applied equally. This does not necessarily mean punishment or, if punishment is involved, each person receiving the same punishment. It means that transgressions against the family's accepted code of conduct (what we might call the Army Values, the Uniform Code of Military Justice or informal expectations) are acknowledged and corrected regardless of the transgressor's status, rank, popularity, ability or anything else. One example of this would be a family where the accepted rule is to be faithful to your time commitments.

In a functional family, the child who plays hooky for a day and the parent who falsely calls in to work sick would both be held accountable to the family group for their actions. In a functional family, no one is above accountability. Responsible Soldiers and leaders, like responsible children and parents, accept correction and accountability for their actions to their superiors privately whenever possible, correct their mistakes and publicly do the right action the next time the opportunity arises.

Accountability in a functional unit is not about shame, determining worth or punishment for punishment's sake, but a performance-oriented tool that generates a command climate of fairness and mutual respect. Accountability creates an environment where erring members can be corrected, forgiven, begin performing again or be justly judged to be unwilling to improve (and subsequently chaptered out).

The concept of correcting, forgiving and moving past a transgression without mental reservation against the transgressor is the key to a unit's long-term performance. It is the key because no one, from the highest-ranking officer to the newest delayed-entry program recruit, has not transgressed a rule. No matter how much we as an Army strive for perfection or build planning models and tools, pretending we can achieve perfection, we cannot.

Perfection is beyond human capacity to even define, much less achieve. Not all accidents are preventable (or we would not have any by now), the enemy gets a vote and good people make mistakes. Bearing this in mind, dysfunctional units that cannot correct and genuinely move past transgressions will quickly lose the ability to harness the talents of their members and will perform poorly. The functional unit, however, will quickly assess accountability for a transgression, correct the core of the issue and accept the member back into the team without reservation so that he can return to performing and contributing.

**Fulfillment of needs.** In 1954, Abraham Maslow described the range of human requirements in his hierarchy of needs (Figure 1). These needs are sequential; higher-order needs are not met until lower-order needs are satisfied. Every human action is in pursuit of the fulfillment of these needs. The Army, like a fam-

ily, exists to satisfy these needs, both for the country it protects and the Soldiers who voluntarily serve in it. Consider this in the context of a family.

Families provide physiological protection to their members and establish a home to provide for safety needs. Men and women marry and have children to begin to meet their belongingness and love needs. Family members work hard at their jobs, school-work and family roles, both to meet their esteem needs and to begin meeting their aesthetic and cognitive needs.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, adult family members attempt to achieve self-actualization (reaching one's full potential) by achieving an intrinsically good and selfless end for those around them by means of their career, volunteer service, marriage, etc.

The similarities to the Army are strikingly direct. A functional unit provides for its physiological needs by providing food and drink, or the money to buy it. It further gives safety in garrison with things like secure buildings and in combat by establishing perimeters and patrols. It then provides belongingness and love through establishing unit identities, conducting counseling and providing engaged leader support.

Once the unit meets that need, it tries to meet esteem needs through awards programs, promotion ceremonies and informal opportunities for giving praise. Next, the Army then can apply concepts like the Army Values and its leadership philosophies to begin to meet the aesthetic and cognitive needs of justice, fairness and order. Finally, in a functional unit with members working towards a goal they believe in, the Army strives to give its Soldiers self-actualization by honorable accomplishment of public service towards the noble end of serving their country.

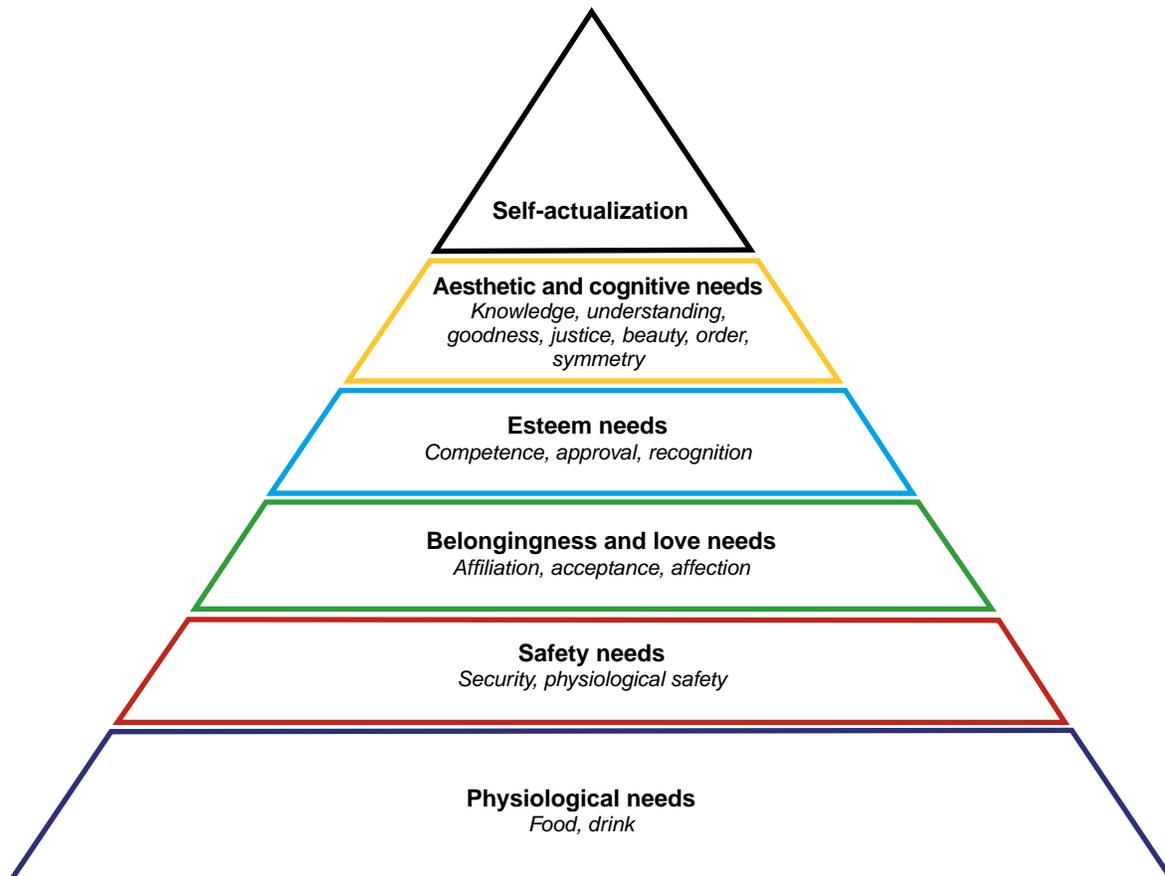


Figure 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Each Soldier, regardless of rank or position, has these driving needs. The functional unit recognizes these needs and uses its members' desire for fulfilling them to achieve their task and purpose. Leaders in this unit begin to fulfill their own higher-level needs of belonging, esteem, cognition and self-actualization by accomplishing their mission's purpose through their subordinates. Subordinates, the Soldiers and junior leaders of the unit, are the key to mission accomplishment and the only reason for a commander's position to exist.

Functional leaders receive their commander's intent and accomplish it by creating a plan that has opportunities for their Soldiers to fulfill their own needs, from physiological to self-actualization. By creating opportunities for meeting these needs and equitably rewarding accomplishment, the commander relieves himself of the need to coerce, threaten or force his Soldiers into doing the work. His Soldiers will give their utmost to accomplish the mission because they want to do well.

In this functional unit, Soldiers come to work and creatively think, work hard and collaborate toward the commander's intent and the unit's mission because it fulfills who they are and what they need. Soldiers have genuine motivation and a sense of purpose; they accentuate their strengths and work hard to overcome their weaknesses because accomplishing their purpose is not just a job, it is who they are.

## Rehabilitating a dysfunctional unit and capitalizing on a functional one

The leader's outlook on his unit directly affects its morale, ability and ultimately its survival on the battlefield. His outlook and actions will determine whether that organization is functional or dysfunctional. To create a functional command climate, a commander must first honestly assess his unit and himself.

Is his unit dysfunctional? Do his company commanders, platoon leaders or squad leaders fight among themselves and betray one another? Does his staff look for opportunities to avoid work because they will not cooperate with each other? Do his Soldiers hate coming to work because they feel there is no way they can ever be a good Soldier in their leader's or peer's eyes? If so, it is the commander's responsibility to recognize the dysfunction that is defeating his unit from within and immediately counteract it, starting with his own attitude.

The commander should reconsider his own measurements of who his Soldiers are and what determines their worth. He should recognize how his Soldiers contribute, even if they have flaws. He must give each person in his charge a visible, attainable and real way to achieve success in his view and acknowledge that success when it is complete. He must put personal and organizational effort into helping his Soldiers overcome their issues. He must recognize and validate honest effort and hard work, even if it is a work in progress. He must capitalize on the strengths of his subordinate leaders, stop comparing one to another in terms of worth and overcome weaknesses through retraining, not just scorn. Lastly and most importantly, if he wants to be a winner himself, he must give every member of his unit the confidence to know they are winners.

If a commander is fortunate enough to have a functional unit, he must capitalize on its momentum and not rest. He must continue to ensure his Soldiers know they are significantly contributing to mission accomplishment. He must continue to use the tools the Army has given him: counseling, awards, public praise, private correction, constructive feedback, rewards for accomplishment and opportunities to demonstrate excellence.

He must continue to accept failure and mistakes as a necessary part of the pursuit of success. Above all, though, he must make clear to each of his Soldiers that they are his team, his victory and his family – and no matter how bad the situation gets, he will always have their back.

In closing, I will share a brief memory of one experience I had in a functional unit. I was an observer/controller augmentee at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, CA, in late 2008. I worked with Tarantula Team observing a unit's headquarters and headquarters company. My immediate supervisor was a Medical Service Corps captain, and his partner was a very capable senior-noncommissioned-officer medic. These were two accomplished Soldiers but unassuming professionals dedicated to the well-being of their rotational unit, their peers and even the hired help like me.

They quickly integrated me into their work group, trusted that I was capable and would give my utmost to any task without reservation and honestly respected my effort. I felt like a valued member of a winning team. I repaid their trust and respect with all the talent, experience and effort I had to offer – to the benefit of both them and the rotational unit.

Now, while it is true that the small size of this group made it easier to work together, this does not negate the basic principles that guided its leaders. The leadership made themselves and everyone within their group cohesive, effective and a greater asset to the Army. They are an example of the power and worth of the functional Army family.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hogan, R.P., *The History of Personality*. Retrieved Aug. 2, 2010, from Hogan Assessments, <http://www.hoganassessments.com/history-of-personality>.

<sup>2</sup> "From Self Exclusion to Self Inclusion," *Empowering Communities*, April 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Hamdan, M., and Eljedi, A., *Families as Resources, Caregivers*. Retrieved Aug. 2, 2010, from the Islamic University of Gaza, <http://site.iugaza.edu.ps/ajedi/files/2010/02/Family-as-resources-caregivers-and-colaborators.ppt>, no date.

<sup>4</sup> Wegscheider-Cruse, S., director, "The Family Trap" (motion picture), 1980.

<sup>5</sup> Mackey, J., "The CEO's Blog," May 1, 2006. Retrieved July 5, 2010, from Whole Foods Market, <http://www2.wholefoodsmarket.com/blogs/jmackey/files/2008/09/hierarchy.jpg>.

## ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

PCS – permanent change of station