People Will Be What They Can See: a Case Study in Leadership

1st Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry, September 1994-September 1996

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Why should we study successful organizations?

Successful organizations are constantly examining their practices to determine what works. In the process, systems evolve over time and take new shape. In the U.S. Army today, there is renewed effort to examine leader development and assessment to ensure we are choosing the best leaders possible to fit each organization's mission and purpose. As we foresee future reductions in the force, it is more important than ever that we identify and retain our best leaders who have the greatest potential for creating a positive impact on our institution.

To examine the tenets of our organization, the Army began an in-depth analysis of the values of our profession and made this challenge: "As the Army transitions from a decade of war, this is an appropriate time for such a critical self-evaluation, so as to build upon our strength and confront our weaknesses. Such reflection, coupled with decisive action aimed at the professional improvement of the total force, will ensure we will always have an Army prepared to meet any challenge and defeat any foe."[1] It is important to look to our past for examples of best practices.

To create great units and still be good stewards of our resources, we must find and examine successful organizations that build high-quality leaders who go out and build more high-quality units. It is a better return on our investment in both human capital and fiscal capital. After all, "Soldiers are not in the Army. Soldiers are the Army."[2] Therefore, we must examine the long-term impact on our people when assessing

successful leaders. We have all read stories of short-term success where a leader pushed his people too hard and caused more long-term harm than good for the organization. As the business world moves to a more responsible lifecycle cost of a resource, so too should leadership assessment. In fact, during a recent survey of more than 40,000 Army professionals, the overwhelming trend among respondents was that the Army needed to "enforce our standards and values, and integrate more Army culture into our unit activities."[3] People want to be part of healthy, productive organizations.

Members of 1st Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) from 1994-1996 provide an example of this concept. Since their time together in 1994-1996, the squadron's leadership has remained in the Army at very high rates of retention and has provided a large number of key leaders across the Army. By almost every measure, Tiger Squadron was a successful unit with a command climate that produced a generation of successful leaders throughout the Army. These leaders emerged despite early exposure to some of the worst leadership in the Army at the time.

The authors surveyed 70 former members of the squadron. Among the survey's many insights, one of the most powerful was the impact of good leadership in repairing command climate through leadership by example; developing and mentoring subordinates; and replicating that success repeatedly throughout the Army via its alumni.

Thesis: people will be what they can see

The impact of leaders on a unit and its legacy is as simple as one phrase: People will be what they can see. This phrase actually has several aspects representing different factors that potentially led to the long-term success of Tiger Squadron and the people inside its organization.

Leading by example and role modeling: the leader's traditional role. In the Army profession, role models provide inspiration to their followers, most especially in times of trouble. Over time, an organization's climate reflects the leader, creating great power to affect positive change. Or there can be a dark side of "people will be what they can see" if young and impressionable leaders see their leaders acting in a negative or toxic way and think that is acceptable behavior.

Mentorship and leader development. Long-term mentorship and career counseling allow the subordinate to visualize himself/herself in a certain role in the future, thereby increasing the likelihood of it happening. Laying out a roadmap or career timeline allows a person to set conditions now for future success. Perhaps the most important question a leader can ask a subordinate is "So, what do you hope to do next?"

Set the conditions to replicate the success: stories, vision and social media. People in successful and healthy command climates are more likely to use the stories and anecdotes in describing to future team members what is possible as they develop their own teams down the road. The oftenmentioned "war stories" play an important role as people say, "Do you remember how we used to …?" We should never underestimate the power of a story or anecdote in replicating quality leadership across the Army.

The preceding factors are discussed in more detail, following.

Leading by example and role modeling

Toxic leadership: background on Tiger Squadron before Fall 1994. When an organization turns around quickly and moves to top-level performance, it begs an important question. Was it good people or good leadership? Did good people cause the lasting legacy, or was the reason the presence of good leadership?

The story of Tiger Squadron serves as an example where good people were stifled by toxic leadership, then quickly transformed into a high-performing unit with a deliberate change in the overall climate. The plight of Tiger Squadron and its higher headquarters, 3rd ACR, before Fall 1994 was well known throughout the Army. Officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) not in the unit were being warned away from the unit

and encouraged to change their orders.[4] Both the squadron and regimental commanders were known as abusive and self-serving leaders.

By Summer 1994, the climate was at an all-time low. Allegations of misconduct, excessive spending and improper relationships were eating away at the morale of the entire regiment and squadron simultaneously. It was not long before word spread of officers working weekends and briefing the colonel "pool-side" while he enjoyed his Sunday with his family. One officer commented that he learned more about leadership by seeing what ***not*** to do than he was able to from positive leadership. Fundamentally, both squadron and regimental commanders had undermined the unit's trust.

A change in leadership in Tiger Squadron. Remarkably, Tiger Squadron's leadership and culture changed in an instant when the regimental and squadron commanders were both relieved. In Fall 1994, the unit was operating with no lieutenant-colonel commander, and people were making plans to transfer out of the organization. Within weeks, the new squadron commander, LTC Robert W. Cone, arrived, and things began to change quickly for the better. In fact, a Tiger Squadron survey found that more than 85 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that Cone's positive leadership style led to a rapid turn-around in the unit. He seemed to genuinely be having fun as a leader while building valuable relationships and making loyal followers of almost everyone in the command.[5]

Looking back at Tiger Squadron's success, three trends emerge and are supported by survey results. First, Cone led by example and demonstrated firsthand how to effectively train a unit. Second, Cone invested time in the leader development and mentorship of young officers, restoring their trust in the Army profession. Finally, he set the conditions for future success by constant storytelling that inspired the next generation of stories and anecdotes used by those who followed. He reinforced the importance of having fun and sticking together as a team. These three changes created the conditions that cemented a legacy of quality leaders who would go on to lead our Army through some great challenges.

Leading by example: training, recognition and socializing

Cone wasted no time after taking command to improve the climate. He led by example in three major areas: effective training, Soldier recognition and focus on "work hard, play hard." To do so, he used the unit's wartime mission as a vehicle to focus the squadron in a positive direction. Cone used the concept of group buy-in. He organized his subordinate leaders to cultivate a unified idea of the most important principles to use as a guiding force within the unit.

Soon after taking command, Cone organized a training conference to learn his leadership's perceived strengths and weaknesses. More importantly, he was there to gain buy-in from all members of the team. Cone asked his leaders to develop their own ideas of what key elements it would take to become a successful organization and compiled the most important tasks into what Cone called the "Big 5," a list of the top five training objectives that defined Tiger Squadron. This list of training objectives became the simple rules that described Tiger Squadron's vision. As the unit began to unify around these key ideas, they strived for the highest levels of excellence in everything they did, creating a high esprit de corps, which in short is "honor and pride for your unit."[6]

The training climate he created welcomed honest mistakes as a sign the organization was learning. In fact, it created confidence among young leaders that they could make honest mistakes (once) in a protected environment. As stated by LTC Jason Wolter (now a battalion commander himself), "We worked harder to not let LTC Cone down, and we worked hard to show constant improvement."[7] Tiger Squadron was constantly evolving and learning. Most of the unit members took that passion for development with them to their next assignments, extending that influence throughout the Army.

Another critical factor in the rapid improvement of Tiger Squadron's command climate was the emphasis on individual/team recognition and unit ceremony. Subordinates saw events as recognizing their value and contributions. Tiger Squadron did not fail to recognize its subordinates, and as a result,

more than 95 percent of survey respondents agreed that "ceremonies mattered."[8] One respondent mentioned that "[Tiger Squadron placed a] great emphasis [on] ceremonies and traditions, [overall unit] esprit de corps," while another stated that ceremonies "reaffirmed our success. It was a way to let us know that we were accepted and doing the right thing."

The combination of promoting esprit de corps and recognizing excellence is essential to an organization's long-term success. People also enjoy the ceremony and social side of organizations because it links them to their predecessors. It is a kind of rites of passage and tradition that gives a larger sense of community.

Finally, in restoring a healthy and positive command climate, Cone did more than just focus on the unit's wartime mission. He took deliberate steps to restore the organization's social aspects. Recognizing that trust is stronger among friends than just coworkers, Cone never missed an opportunity to build connections among his team.

To foster those connections, however, requires a sincere interest in other members of the team. There are few ways to better foster a connection among a team than to socialize together as entire families. In restoring the climate, Cone worked hard to bring his leaders together outside the context of the strictly work environment. It is not only the moments that include just the adults around a keg of beer but the Saturday picnics, weddings or children's birthdays that begin to build those bonds. It's best described as "friends at work make work more friendly."

That was certainly true for Tiger Squadron. The parties and socials did something far more important than allow people to see each other. It brought together junior and senior officers and their spouses for conversations that ranged from the Army profession to the best brands of baby formula. Those exchanges were important on so many levels. Mostly, because when families know and respect each other, it is easier to get them to spend time together. The more they are together, the more they talk. The more they talk, the more they share ideas. The more they share ideas, the better the unit becomes and the richer their lives become. Something as simple as a chili cook-off hosted at the squadron commander's house was cited more times than any other single event as a defining moment in the unit's culture.[9] Never underestimate the potential of hosting a party at your house.

When asked, 100 percent of the survey respondents agreed that Tiger Squadron created a culture where it was as "important to play hard as it was to work hard." This critical component of leader involvement shows us that in extremely successful organizations, leaders go above and beyond in showing their subordinates that having fun together is just as important as being successful together.[10]

Mentorship and leader development

Active and involved mentorship. One of the most important aspects of the Tiger Squadron renaissance between 1994-96 was Cone's career advice and coaching. His investment in his junior officers and NCOs provided an example for them to follow later in their careers – people matter.

Cone would often tell stories about his own development as a young officer growing up in the early 1980s. He would cite the influence of senior leaders (generals such as Eric Shinseki, Scott Wallace and "Doc" Bahnsen, to name just a few) who helped shape his style, personality and focus on training. In many ways, everyone under his command felt that connection to their "ancestors."[11] Squadron members began to visualize their own future in the long-term. Just as Cone had grown over the last 20 years, they could too if they maintained a long-term view of their lives and careers.

LTC Brian Byers described why Cone invested so much time in the mentorship and career development of his junior officers. He stated that Cone was "focused on building teams at the lowest level." Cone wanted the unit to know that the Army was a good place to work with good ideals and that it had been good to him. He didn't want them to walk away from an organization that had treated him so well and for them to not be jaded by their prior experience in the unit.[12]

Empowering subordinates. A significant aspect of Cone's unification and success within Tiger Squadron was his ability to empower his subordinate leaders as well as his unique ability to work beside them rather

than over them. Cone took personal interest three levels down in the organizational hierarchy. He became a transformational leader, giving his subordinates both the ability to be leaders themselves as well as inspiring them to excel.

Another member of the unit, LTC Chip Daniels, who also went on to successful battalion command, stated, "Cone empowered his [junior officers] because he trusted us. This made me feel like my opinion and decisions were valuable to the Tiger Squadron team. He demonstrated this trust by allowing [us] to develop our own training plans, and even gave us full days to maneuver our [unit during training]. I know that a young [24-year-old second lieutenant] probably lacks the experience to fully maximize that opportunity. There was likely some short-term waste that could have been prevented if more senior officers had strictly managed what I did with that time, fuel and other resources. However, that opportunity fostered a sense of responsibility and ownership in me. I wanted to use the time to [train my team to accomplish our goal]. That is what we did. In short, there was a short-term cost in terms of fuel, time, etc., but the long-term gain in leadership development was vastly more important and enduring."

Within Tiger Squadron, evidence shows that Cone focused on allowing his subordinates the opportunity to exercise creativity and initiative in accomplishing their tasks. In the authors' survey, more than 80 percent of the respondents stated that leaders in Tiger Squadron did not micromanage their subordinates.[13] Furthermore, a remarkable 100 percent believed that subordinates were allowed the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. One respondent mentioned that "leaders were given a task and the freedom to execute within the commander's intent," and another mentioned, "I was allowed a lot of freedom to explore different ideas and implement several programs to try to increase readiness throughout the squadron."[14]

Cementing the legacy: the power of stories

Restoring the command climate (both on and off duty). As Cone was restoring the unit's trust in senior leadership, it also helped considerably that he took time to explain in broad ways how the unit fit into the context of the much larger mosaic of the professional Army. It felt like he was letting them in on a secret. It was one thing to do just the job, but when he explained where the unit fit into the larger picture, it gave its members a much clearer sense of purpose. It allowed them to connect the dots in their understanding and career development (which later reinforced his points in the mentorship he provided). But more importantly, as he developed this learning organization – as Cone shared with unit members the much larger issues – it went a long way to create a sense among junior officers that they were "part of the club."[15] What he was really doing was instilling a connection to the Army profession in everyone.

Staying connected through social media. Part of the long-term success of the unit over time was the power of social media. Social media and today's technology makes it even easier for high-performing units to stay in touch and share news of family, promotions, struggles and success. Email, mailing lists and Facebook aid not only Soldiers to stay in touch, but also their family members. In fact, when spouses stay in touch, this might be one of the most powerful connective forces of all. That allows two sets of eyes and ears to remain connected.

By leveraging the power of email distribution lists, Facebook and holiday-card mailing lists, the friends and families of Tiger Squadron stayed in touch. Almost two decades later, most officers and NCOs the authors interviewed commented that they routinely stay in touch with the people of Tiger Squadron. Even more impressive to see are the examples of Tiger Squadron alumni reaching back to start helping the children of their friends as they enter college, military service or their own careers.

This connection and network of former colleagues was able to stay better connected to help each other. In some cases, it was a simple case of sharing written products or example copies of standard policy letters. In other cases, it was a friend in another command or another country looking into a matter personally. Regardless of the context, it was through bonds and trust created in the beginning and then fostered through social media that kept the Tiger Squadron family together. Later, all those connections

translated into career and professional functions that contributed to a healthier institution.

The stories we tell our teams now. In addition to keeping friends and family connected, the stories and visuals of Tiger Squadron continue to influence and improve our Army decades later. One of the most interesting findings from conducting the Tiger Squadron survey was the influence of the experiences from Tiger Squadron on its members. All the respondents said they use Tiger Squadron "as a teaching point" and believe this was "one of the most memorable times" of their Army career. The climate in Tiger Squadron helped define its members and created a sense that they "wanted to emulate its characteristics" everywhere they served. Leaders in Tiger Squadron routinely cited examples they saw in those two years that still influence them 17 years later.

Even more impressively, these future leaders took those very same lessons and are applying them throughout the Army today. Wolter, a former platoon leader in Tiger Squadron, said he used Cone's command philosophy (originally written in 1994) in 2012 when he wrote his own command philosophy.[16]

Conclusions and recommendations

Prior to Cone's arrival, Tiger Squadron was under the control of an underperforming leader. It was not until Cone arrived and changed the culture within Tiger Squadron that its members received a chance to realize their full potential. Because of his work, the people of Tiger Squadron were able to "see what they could be." What they became is impressive.

Now a four-star general and commanding general of the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), Cone came from their ranks. Sergeant Major of the Army Ray Chandler, a former command sergeant major in TRADOC; retired CSM John Sparks; and general officers Robert Abrams and Paul Funk also came from their ranks. Other notables include a brigade commander, Scott Efflandt; a growing list of more than a dozen battalion commanders; five division G-3s; six special assistants to four-star generals; and a large list of sergeants major. Clearly, there was more than just a lucky convergence of quality people in the squadron.

This transition in leadership highlights the importance of the presence of a high-performing mentor in determining if in fact a good unit will produce good leaders. Cone appears to be just as responsible as Tiger Squadron itself in explaining the organization's success. Similarly, Cone was successful as a commander because of the exceptional personnel already present before he arrived. The highly selective nature of Tiger Squadron set conditions for leaders to excel. When analyzing both facts simultaneously, one can begin to discern the importance of both factors in the squadron's success.

When we asked survey respondents to name the most influential person in Tiger Squadron, as expected, a large majority specifically mentioned Cone and several members of his leadership team. However, one respondent stated that the most influential person was "[the regimental commander who was relieved due to the poor command climate]. The lifecycle pattern of [Tiger Squadron] then was very similar to E/1-506th in World War II. When Dick Winters was asked at the U.S. Military Academy in 1999 why Easy Company was so cohesive, he responded immediately with 'Captain Sobel.' The previous dysfunctional climate set the conditions that allowed exceptional leaders to excel."[17]

When looking at the success of a great leader in a great unit, one cannot forget the circumstances that surrounded their existence. For Tiger Squadron, the failures of the previous commanders set the stage for great changes to follow. In an email to a former Tiger Squadron troop executive officer in 2009, Cone acknowledged that had the previous commander not been removed in the dramatic fashion surrounding his departure, Cone would have inherited a "cancerous unit" and the chances of success would have significantly decreased. Cone himself realized the importance of this circumstance in his eventual success.[18]

Following situations of great organizational turmoil, it requires positive leadership to step in and set a new direction. Tiger Squadron's highlights from 1994-1996 are examples of the potential of such change. Through a focus on leading by example, powering down to subordinates, investing in leader

development and then cementing those changes through fun and positive social experiences, great things can occur for the long-term health of an organization.

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Notes

[1] TRADOC annual report, "U.S. Army: Army Profession Campaign" April 2, 2012, http://cape.army.mil/repository/CY11ArmyProfessionAnnualReport.pdf.
[2] Abrams, Creighton, quoted in ***A Better War*** by Lewis Sorley, Harcourt, Inc., 1999.
[3] TRADOC annual report.
[4] The author was in Germany on vacation in June 1993 a year before arriving and was warned by a sergeant in line at the airport not to go to the 3rd ACR, that the climate was terrible.
[5] Kopser, Joseph, and Allen Trujillo, Tiger Squadron unit survey conducted March 22-Aug. 1, 2012.
[6] Interview with LTC Doug Boltuc April 20, 2012.
[7] Interview with LTC Jason Wolter, April 20, 2012.
[8] Kopser and Trujillo.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Allen Trujillo, Kiara Ward, Leena Vazirani, Laura Rodriguez and Matt Brown, "Tiger Squadron, 3rd ACR – Team KALLM" research paper, April 30, 2012.
[11] Essay of comments about Tiger Squadron by LTC Chip Daniels, Jan. 6, 2012.
[12] Interview with LTC Brian Byers, April 27, 2012.
[13] Kopser and Trujillo.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Daniels.
[16] Interview with Wolter.
[17] **Editor's note:** CPT Herbert M. Sobel commanded Company E for the unit's basic training at Camp Toccoa, GA. A strict disciplinarian, he earned the hatred of many of his men. However, many of the company's veterans also credited the intense training he gave them with creating the finest company in 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment. Sobel was negatively portrayed as inept in the television series ***Band of Brothers***, a television miniseries focusing on MAJ Richard Winters' experiences. Winters was one of the officers to succeed Sobel in command of Company E.
[18] Interview with LTC Michael Donahue, March 2012.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ACR – armored cavalry regiment
NCO – noncommissioned officer
TRADOC – Training and Doctrine Command