

# TRUST: A New Formulation of a Fundamental Principle

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Ask any leader in the U.S. Army to list attributes that encompass either a successful organization or a successful individual and trust will be high on the list. Trust is an attribute that most Army leaders believe is important. When thinking about trust, I was reminded of what Dr. Don Snider, long-time Army officer and professor, once said to his students: “Trust is the currency of an Army officer.”<sup>1</sup> The term currency refers to a monetary system. Following this analogy, it makes sense that if a person has no money, then he or she is “broke.” If that same “broke” person continues to spend, on credit, while no additional funds are added to their account, he or she would very quickly find themselves bankrupt. Now back to the idea of trust and the Army profession, if an Army leader lacks the trust of those he or she serves with, that leader is considered “broke” from a professional standpoint. To follow the logic, if that same person continues living with no trust in his or her account and no additional “trust-based funds” were added, eventually he or she would be bankrupt, leadership-wise. I wonder if we have leaders today who are on a zero balance when it comes to trust, or worse, are morally bankrupt due to a lack of trust? The purpose of this article is to encourage Army leaders at echelon to get back to the basics with regards to building trust because “the Army profession rests on a bedrock of trust.”<sup>2</sup>

While most people have a general understanding of what trust is and is not, it is appropriate to begin looking at how the Army understands the term. Army doctrine states that “trust is shared confidence among commanders, subordinates, and partners in that all can be relied on and all are competent in performing their assigned tasks.”<sup>3</sup> Imbedded in the Army’s understanding of trust is the idea that trust is lived and demonstrated within a community.<sup>4</sup> The idea of “shared confidence” being “relied on” as well as listing the chain of command clearly demonstrates this communal context. It is in this community that the Army lives and fights. Therefore, trust is not simply an important idea but a vital one, which is why Army leadership doctrine, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, refers to trust or a variant of it more times than there are actual pages.<sup>5</sup>

Trust in the Army context can be viewed as both a strategic concept as well as a tactical attribute. As a strategic concept, the Army understands that as a profession it must maintain trust with the American people. An example of this from doctrine states, “trust is the foundation of the Army’s relationship with the American people, who rely on the Army to ethically, effectively, and efficiently serve the Nation.”<sup>6</sup> This strategic concept, while societally vital, is not the focus of this article. The emphasis is the tactical attribute of trust of each military leader.<sup>7</sup> It must be noted though that both of these aspects of trust, at the strategic and the tactical level, are intertwined. The Army as a whole cannot be trusted if leaders at echelon are not trustworthy and vice versa. Trust at the tactical level occurs in individual leaders and is viewed in their specific operating environments.

Thus, leaders at echelon must make trust part of the DNA of their operating environment. But the question arises, how do I build trust? According to doctrine, building trust is part of the core competencies of leading.<sup>8</sup> A helpful summary of this section of doctrine is portrayed in Figure 1.

And while this matrix is very helpful, it became clear, as an instructor, that many students didn’t remember much of what it stated specifically or what doctrine more generally contained with regards to building trust.

Leaders build trust to mediate relationships and encourage commitment among followers. Trust starts from respect among people and grows from common experiences and shared understanding. Leaders and followers share in building trust.	
Sets personal example for trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is firm, fair, and respectful to gain trust.</li> <li>• Assesses degree of own trustworthiness.</li> </ul>
Takes direct actions to build trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fosters positive relationship with others.</li> <li>• Identifies areas of commonality (understanding, goals, and experiences).</li> <li>• Engages other members in activities and objectives.</li> <li>• Corrects team members who undermine trust with their attitudes or actions.</li> </ul>
Sustains a climate of trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assesses factors or conditions that promote or hinder trust.</li> <li>• Keeps people informed of goals, actions, and results.</li> <li>• Follows through on actions related to expectations of others.</li> </ul>

**Figure 1 — The Competency BUILDS TRUST (ADP 6-22)**

With this in mind, and after teaching numerous iterations of students, a formula occurred to me on how leaders could think about building trust with others. It must first be stated that I recognize and believe that there is no such thing as a simple formula for trust. Thus, this is not a “fool proof” recipe but a guide in how to think about building trust in the Army context. Additionally, all of the concepts in the formula are very explicitly discussed in doctrine.<sup>10</sup> But in thinking through how to build trust, this new formula of these older and familiar concepts gives a new and fresh perspective on this topic. The formula for trust includes four C’s which are:

**(Character + Competence + Commitment) Consistency = Trust**

The three C’s within the bracket come directly from doctrine and are both explicitly and implicitly related to trust.<sup>11</sup> Each one of these three C’s is vital to the Army professional in leading Soldiers as well as building trust. The brackets, mathematically, distribute the outside term to those terms within. Thus, a leader needs consistency in all of the inside areas: character, competence, and commitment. When a leader consistently demonstrates character, consistently demonstrates competence, and consistently demonstrates commitment, those around that leader have the potential to trust them. We will look at each “C” briefly for further insight.

**Character**

Character is the first component when thinking about trust. With regards to character, the Army states that: “A person’s character affects how they lead. A leader’s character consists of their true nature guided by their conscience, which affects their moral attitudes and actions... Character consists of the moral and ethical qualities of an individual revealed through their decisions and actions.”<sup>12</sup>

The Army, being a values-based organization, needs men and women with deep moral convictions and the courage to live by those convictions. A way of thinking about character is being the right kind of person. Department of the Army Pamphlet 165-19, *Moral Leadership*, states that “character is described as the moral and ethical quality that helps leaders determine what is right and gives a leader motivation to do what is appropriate regardless of the circumstances or consequences.”<sup>13</sup> Character is needed when times are easy and when times are tough. Character is needed when people are looking and when people are not looking. Character is not merely what you do but is part of who you are. Specifically, when the Army looks at character, five attributes are of key importance. These are seen in Figure 2.

When professionals have character, others around them have a sense of confidence that tasks are being accomplished ethically. Character is a key component when thinking about building trust.

Factors internal and central to a leader serving in either leader or follower roles that constitute an individual's character.	
Army Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Values are principles, standards, or qualities considered essential for successful leaders.</li> <li>• Guide leaders' decisions and actions in accomplishing missions, performing duty, and all aspects of life.</li> <li>• The Army has seven values applicable to all Army individuals: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage.</li> </ul>
Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Propensity to experience something from another person's point of view.</li> <li>• Ability to identify with and enter into another person's feelings and emotions, enabling clearer communications and better guidance.</li> <li>• Desire to care for and take care of Soldiers and others.</li> </ul>
Warrior Ethos/ Service Ethos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal shared attitudes and beliefs that embody the spirit of the Army profession.</li> </ul>
Discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decisions and actions consistent with the Army Values; willing obedience to lawful orders.</li> </ul>
Humility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inherently motivated to support mission goals ahead of actions that are self-serving.</li> <li>• Possesses honest and accurate self-understanding.</li> <li>• Eager for input and feedback from others.</li> </ul>

**Figure 2 — Attributes Associated with CHARACTER (ADP 6-22)**

### Competence

A second component for trust is competence. The Army as a profession is made up of experts in their specific fields who work together to accomplish the mission. This points back to the communal nature of the profession. A way of thinking about competence relates to having the right knowledge. Specifically, doctrine states that “developing military-technical expertise is the foundation of competence, which is in turn a significant basis of professional trust within cohesive teams. Army professionals trust each other to perform their jobs absent evidence to the contrary.”<sup>15</sup> Every Soldier should know basic warrior skills and tasks while distinct skills and knowledge are necessary depending on the Soldier's specific military occupational specialty (MOS).

From a doctrinal standpoint, the box below states how the Army views the demonstration of technical and tactical competence:

Demonstrates technical and tactical competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performs duty with discipline and to standards, while striving for excellence.</li> <li>• Displays appropriate knowledge of equipment, procedures, and methods; recognizes and generates innovative solutions.</li> <li>• Uses knowledgeable sources and subject matter experts.</li> </ul>
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When professionals are competent in their warrior tasks, others around them have a sense of confidence that tasks are being accomplished effectively and efficiently. Competence is a key component when thinking about building trust.

### Commitment

The third component for trust is commitment, which apart from character and competence is harder to define. A way of looking at commitment relates to having the right priorities. The Army defines commitment as the “willing dedication or allegiance to a cause or organization.”<sup>17</sup> This is in the context of being committed versus simply complying. That is commitment is always better than compliance. Units that have men and women who are committed to the mission and organization will generally outperform personnel who exist to simply comply to a standard. Proper commitment may mean that there are times when priorities shift. There may be times when

leaders need to prioritize a mission, other times when leaders need to prioritize a Soldier's or family's needs, and so on. When professionals are committed to the organization and the mission, others around them can have a sense of confidence that tasks are being accomplished wholeheartedly. Commitment is a key component when thinking about building trust.

Doctrinally, the Army pulls these three concepts together with regards to the Army Ethic. Figure 3 helps to explain and clarify all three concepts together.

Trusted Army professionals have character, competence and commitment. When these three components are lived out, they meet the intent of the "builds trust" matrix of APD 6-22 (Figure 1). As a reminder, the three areas which the matrix encourages are setting a personal example for a trusting environment, taking direct action to build trust, and sustaining a climate of trust. Character relates to the first idea, that of being an example, because it takes the right person to be the right example. Competence relates to the second idea, which is taking direct action, because it takes the right knowledge to take the right action. And commitment relates to the third idea, which is sustaining the climate of trust, because it takes the right priorities to sustain the mission and the organization.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 3 — The Army Ethic, including Army Values (ADP 6-22)**

***The Army Ethic***  
***The Heart of the Army***

The Army ethic includes the moral principles that guide our decisions and actions as we fulfill our purpose: to support and defend the Constitution and our way of life. Living the Army ethic is the basis for our mutual trust with each other and the American people. Today our ethic is expressed in laws, values, and shared beliefs within American and Army cultures. The Army ethic motivates our commitment as Soldiers and Army civilians who are bound together to accomplish the Army mission as expressed in our historic and prophetic motto:

***This We'll Defend.***

Living the Army ethic inspires our shared identity as *trusted Army professionals* with distinctive roles as *honorable servants*, *Army experts*, and *stewards of the profession*. To honor these obligations we adopt, live by, and uphold the moral principles of the Army ethic. Beginning with our solemn oath of service as defenders of the Nation, we voluntarily incur the extraordinary moral obligation to be:

***Trusted Army Professionals***

***Honorable Servants of the Nation—Professionals of Character:***

We serve honorably—according to the Army ethic—under civilian authority while obeying the laws of the Nation and all legal orders; further, we reject and report illegal, unethical, or immoral orders or actions.

We take pride in honorably serving the Nation with integrity, demonstrating character in all aspects of our lives.

In war and peace, we recognize the intrinsic dignity and worth of all people, treating them with respect.

We lead by example and demonstrate courage by doing what is right despite risk, uncertainty, and fear; we candidly express our professional judgment to subordinates, peers, and superiors.

***Army Experts—Competent Professionals:***

We do our duty leading and following with discipline, striving for excellence, putting the needs of others above our own, and accomplishing the mission as a team.

We accomplish the mission and understand it may demand risking our lives and justly taking the lives of others.

We continuously advance the expertise of our chosen profession through lifelong learning, professional development, and certifications.

***Stewards of the Army Profession—Committed Professionals:***

We embrace and uphold the Army Values and standards of the profession, always accountable to each other and the American people for our decisions and actions.

We wisely use the resources entrusted to us, ensuring our Army is well-led and well-prepared, while caring for Soldiers, Army civilians, and families.

We continuously strengthen the essential characteristics of the Army profession, reinforcing our bond of trust with each other and the American people.

**LOYALTY–DUTY–RESPECT–SERVICE–HONOR–INTEGRITY–COURAGE**

## Consistency

The final component for trust — and the one that bolsters each of the other three components — is consistency. While the other three might be oversimplified as being the right person with the right knowledge and the right priorities, consistency adds the right timing into the equation, which is all of the time. This doesn't mean that professionals are perfect, but it does mean that they are reliable or dependable. Army doctrine states, "trust encompasses reliance upon others, confidence in their abilities, and consistency in behavior."<sup>20</sup> Army professionals need to do the right thing, the right way, for the right reason, not some of the time, but all of the time. This consistency in character, competence, and commitment gives others around them a sense of confidence that all is being accomplished reliably. Consistency is a key component when thinking about trust. Therefore: (Character + Competence + Commitment) Consistency = Trust.

But what happens when one or more components are missing or lacking? The simple answer is: that leader might not be trustworthy. An example of this might be a leader who has both competence and commitment but lacks character. This might be what many call a counterproductive leader.<sup>21</sup> Or what about the leader who has character and commitment but is not competent? This would be an incompetent leader who could very easily get Soldiers killed. Or what about a leader who is not consistent in one or more of these areas? Like the previous examples, this would be someone who breeds mistrust within the unit or larger organization. Trusted Army leaders need all four of the C's.<sup>22</sup>

While it is true that there is no formula for trust, the above formulation is a new way to start thinking about an old but vital topic, which is how to build trust. Additionally, it is formatted in a way that is easy to remember and in a doctrinally sound manner. And if correct, implies that every Army leader ask themselves, how do those with whom I serve see my character? How do those with whom I serve see my demonstrated competence? How do those with whom I serve see my commitment? How do those with whom I serve see consistency in me? Also, leaders need to ask themselves: How am I intentionally teaching these principles, and how are my Soldiers regularly getting "sets and reps" in these ideas? If trust is the currency of our profession, then I pray that our bank accounts will be full! If trust is the bedrock of our profession, then I hope that our foundations are solid. If so, then we will be the trusted professionals that our Army desires, a part of a trusted profession that our nation needs!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The author was a student of Dr. Snider's at the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) in 2002, and he has listened to a number of his presentations since that time, including, most recently, during Intermediate Level Education (ILE). While the focus of the lecture was officers, which is what the quote is focused on, the idea can easily be extended to all Army professionals.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras, "Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty on the Army Profession," monograph published by the U.S. Army War College Press, February 2015, x.

<sup>3</sup> Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, July 2019, 1-2 through 1-3.

<sup>4</sup> While this is a true statement, trust can also apply individually. An example of this might be "I trust in my skills to accomplish the assigned mission." Although in the Army context, this still carries a communal component since even the idea of individual trust helps the larger team.

<sup>5</sup> ADP 6-22 refers to trust or a variant of that word 196 times while only having 132 total pages in the document.

<sup>6</sup> ADP 6-22, 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Doctrinally, trust is one of the five characteristics of the Army profession, which also include honorable service, military expertise, stewardship, and esprit de corps found in ADP 6-22, 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> ADP 6-22, 1-16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 5-9.

<sup>10</sup> These concepts are not only found in doctrine but have been used by Army leaders for years. For instance, in a famous speech in 1991 to the Corps of Cadets at West Point, GEN Norman Schwarzkopf stated that "to be a 21st century leader, you must have two things, competence and character." The full speech can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-aytw--YUY>.

<sup>11</sup> One of the most overt examples in relating these three C's to trust came from a slide graphic from a Captains Career Course distance learning course, Lesson 701T-UCCAP106, entitled, "The Army Profession and the Army

Professional Ethic,” slide 17. On a Venn diagram, trust was illustrated at the confluence of character, competence, and commitment. Additionally, ADP 6-22 lists these three C’s under “Trusted Army Professionals,” which can be viewed later in the article.

<sup>12</sup> ADP 6-22, 2-1.

<sup>13</sup> Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA PAM) 165-19, *Moral Leadership*, 27 November 2020, 4.

<sup>14</sup> ADP 6-22, 2-12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 1-5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 5-14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 5-2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 1-9.

<sup>19</sup> The idea of connecting the matrix to the three C’s of the profession was introduced to the author in a conversation with Janetta Harris, Center for the Army Profession and Leadership (CAPL), at the Combined Arms Center (CAC) Ethics Training Conference at Fort Benning, GA, on 24 February 2022.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 5-8.

<sup>21</sup> Counterproductive leadership is the newer term for the older phrase “toxic leader.” The definition of a counterproductive leader is: “The demonstration of leader behaviors that violate one or more of the Army’s core leader competencies or Army Values, preventing a climate conducive to mission accomplishment.” (ADP 6-22, 8-7).

<sup>22</sup> While I believe that other topics can be included in the trust discussion, I also believe that there should not be fewer topics discussed. What I mean is that all four of these are vital. In addition, many other topics might nest within the four C’s. An example of this came up in a discussion with a student about the need for both personal and professional growth. While I believe that this a vital area to be a trusted leader, I would argue that this idea falls under the concept of being a humble leader, which is one of the five attributes of character.

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