

# BATTALION OE TEAM

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**W**hat organizational effectiveness is, and what it is not, is still a subject of considerable discussion in the Army. OE consultants (OECs) are sometimes regarded as meddlers or spies or worse. And, admittedly, the OE sessions that most of us in the Army have been exposed to have varied greatly in type, style, purpose, and quality. Some have been excellent and others almost useless, especially during the mid-1970s when OE was just getting started.

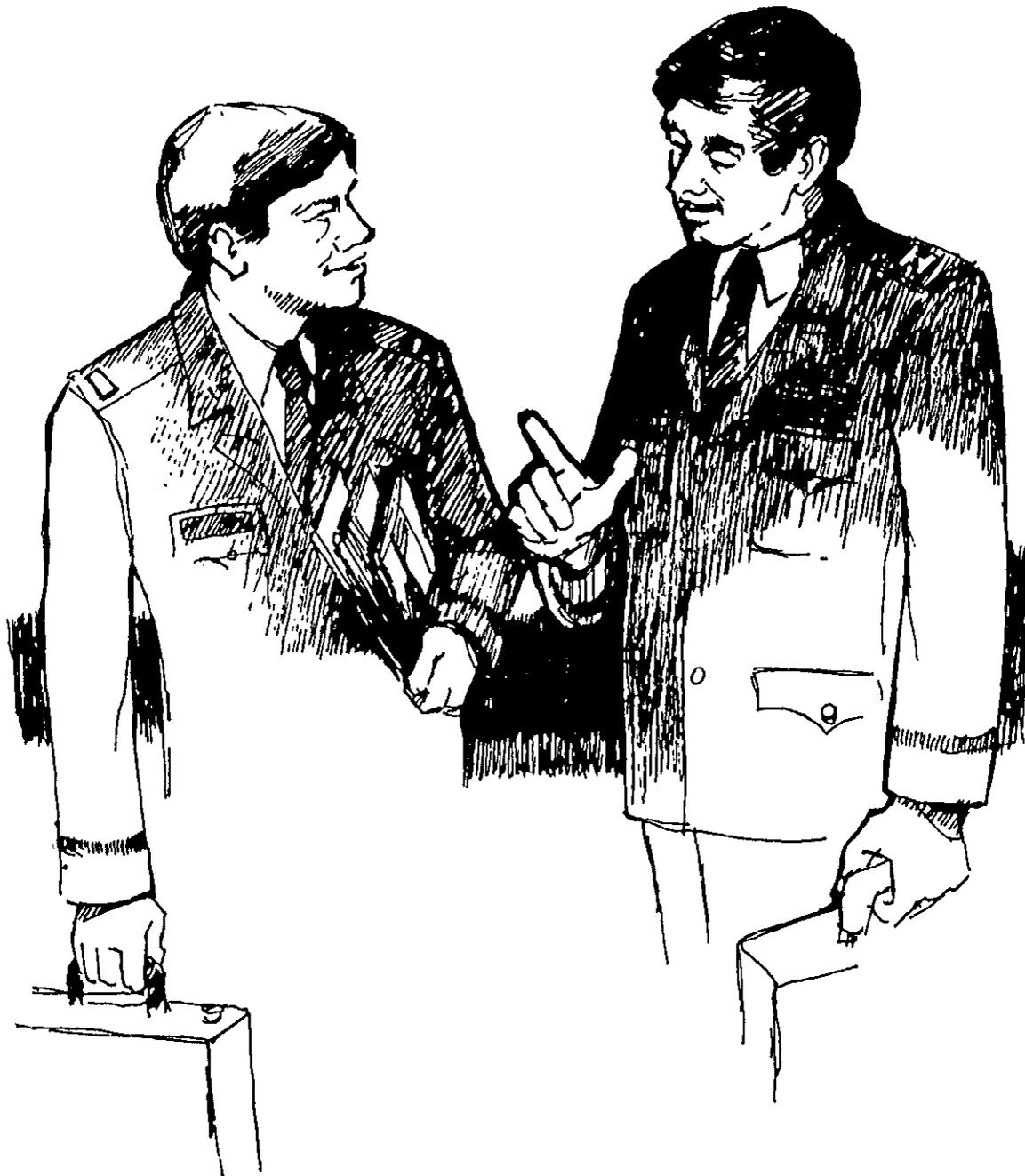
When "having an OE session" becomes an end in itself with no clear purpose or goal, the session is sure to fail, and the participants will leave convinced that it has been a complete waste of time. Similarly, when OECs indulge in pedantic oratory or try to run the session as if they were psychologists conducting a group encounter, then the participants will tune out, roll their eyes, and start mumbling about "touchy-feely stuff." (That's one

reason why "workshop" is a better term than "session" and a more descriptive one.)

Commanders, too, sometimes resist the idea. Some of them seem to think that having an OE workshop will be admitting to their superiors that there are problems in their units that they cannot handle themselves. Overcoming this attitude is an educational process, but commanders at all levels should realize that OE in the Army is here to stay and should accept it as another tool that they can use to make a good unit even better. OECs don't try to take away a commander's prerogatives; rather, like his other staff officers, they are simply there to help the commander exercise his command.

The key to avoiding negative results from a workshop, therefore, is planning, and the battalion OE team — the commander and the OECs — must work closely in this effort from the beginning to the end.





The commander must first determine whether there is a need for such a workshop. For example, he may be an incoming commander who would like to identify the issues, goals, problems, and personalities of his new unit. Or, if he has been in command for some time, he may perceive a problem in his unit that needs to be solved — poor morale, NCO discontent, lack of communication, or unclear responsibilities. Or he may simply want to develop a sense of command purpose among the leaders of the unit.

In any case, the battalion commander must ask himself three basic questions: Where are we now? Where do we want to be? and How do we get there from here? Sometimes the answers to the first two questions are not clear, and answering them can become the purpose of having an OE workshop — especially when it is a transition workshop for a new commander. The answer to the third ques-

tion then becomes the plan or process that the commander and the OECs will use during a workshop.

After identifying the need for a workshop, the commander should sit down with his OECs to develop and refine the overall purpose and the goals of the workshop and then the process to be used to achieve these goals. This is the critical and most difficult step; it is here that the commander must be open to the ideas of the OECs and have confidence in their knowledge and experience. While he should listen to their ideas, they should listen to his, too. He usually knows his unit and his men best — which methods will work with them and which will not. If the OECs are professionals, they will accept the rejection of their ideas and then try another way to accomplish the given objective. Conversely, if the commander is a professional, he will be receptive to the OEC's ideas and will

give them the benefit of any doubts. In other words, they must work as a team without egotism, power plays, emotionalism, or defensiveness.

## GUIDELINES

As part of the planning process, this group must decide who will attend the OE workshop — officers only, commanders and staff officers only, senior NCOs only, or a mixture of key officers and NCOs. This decision depends to a large extent on the purpose and the goals of the workshop, and each situation is different. But there are certain guidelines.

First, the total number of participants should be limited. In a battalion, a group of fewer than six is probably too small to be effective, and a group of more than 20 or 25 is probably too large and unwieldy. Second, since any problems in a battalion must be solved through a cooperative effort that will involve both officers and NCOs, it is usually best to have some of each participate in the workshop. This will get the entire leadership structure of the battalion together and will facilitate the implementation of the workshop's conclusions later.

The next step is to conduct a briefing for the participants before the workshop to let them know the purpose and the goals, to tell them when and where it is to be held, and to issue them any pre-workshop assignments. It can also serve to promote the idea of the OE workshop, for there will undoubtedly be some who are still skeptical about OE and particularly about their own participation in it.

The workshop itself will be better and will include more open and honest participation if it is held off-post with everyone in civilian clothes. The group needs to get away from the unit with its usual interruptions from visitors and telephone calls. And although everyone knows who the boss is, and what rank everyone else has, the civilian clothes seem to be less inhibiting. (OMA funds can be used for food, lodging, and travel expenses.)

Certain ground rules must be established ahead of time by the OECs and the commander, and these rules must be made known at the beginning of the workshop. Some of the more common ones are that everyone should be open and honest, but should remember that the boss is still boss; that all information presented will be confidential and will not go outside the unit; and finally, that they should relax and have fun. The commander should set the tone of the workshop in his opening remarks. It is important for him to encourage the participants to speak freely without fear of retribution and to show them that he is sincerely interested in their comments and ideas.

During the workshop, the battalion OE team must continue to cooperate. If something is obviously not working, the commander should step in and correct it in a positive manner. If nonproductive verbal conflicts or altercations arise, he must use his authority to intervene

and defuse the situation. If the OECs see a need to branch off or expand into certain areas, they should recommend this to the commander. The point here is that flexibility must be considered an important part of the plan.

(A word of warning to commanders: When in doubt, trust the process. The OECs are more experienced in the methodology of OE workshops, and what may appear initially to be irrelevant may in fact be critical in developing a certain point later on.)

If an OE workshop is planned and conducted right, it can do a number of things for a commander. The following are representative:

- It can either solve or point the way toward solving specific problems such as lack of communication (laterally as well as upward and downward) within the unit, discontent among officers or NCOs, and unclear goals, missions, or responsibilities.
- It can serve as a team-building process to increase cohesion, cooperation, and understanding within the unit.
- It can serve as a planning process for such upcoming special events as annual general inspections and off-post tactical exercises.
- It can be used to analyze and improve individual leadership styles.
- It can increase the morale of leaders at all levels by allowing them to express their ideas and opinions and to participate more fully in the planning and implementation of the way in which the battalion conducts its business.
- It can give the commander information about the current status of his unit and about the quality and personality of the unit's leaders.
- It can set goals, procedures, and tasks for the future.
- It can demonstrate that the commander is truly interested in his people and that he is willing to listen to his subordinates' ideas, problems, recommendations, and opinions.

A transition workshop, particularly, when he assumes command, can put a commander two or three months ahead in understanding his new unit's mission, problems, and people. Any workshops held later can help him keep informed of the climate of leadership within the battalion, solve specific problems, and, more important, prevent certain issues from becoming problems.

OE is not a cure-all. But a battalion OE team is a useful tool that commanders should take advantage of whenever the need arises. The end result will be a more unified, smoother operating, better unit. And that is what commanding is all about.



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