

Incentives and Disincentives

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Effective systems of positive and negative reinforcement are vital to the success of any large organization. This is particularly so in the Army where, in time of war, we try to encourage exceptional conduct that may involve risk of life and to deter acts of poor discipline that can lead to the destruction of our forces.

A commander's aim in devising an incentive program is two-fold: First he seeks to recognize worthy achievements of individual soldiers or to correct substandard performance. Second, more broadly, he hopes the examples that result will increase the esprit and combat effectiveness of his unit. Because our business is ultimately about the group and not the individual, it is primarily in terms of the latter objective that we should assess the value of any particular motivational tool.

I would like to offer some general principles that leaders should keep in mind when establishing policies for rewards and punishments that contribute to the betterment of an entire organization. Additionally, I will include some specific methods and techniques that officers and noncommissioned officers in a battalion may find useful in realizing that goal.

Incentives

The first and most fundamental question a leader must ask of himself in devising an incentive program is: What are the unit's long-term top priorities? Here, we mean training and tactical proficiency, maintenance readiness, a responsible and competent chain of command, and the like. Since there is a limit to their time and energy, leaders

need to decide what is important and then focus their efforts accordingly. What they choose to recognize as excellence should reflect this emphasis. If the soldiers perceive that leaders put equal emphasis on a wide array of matters, they will be confused.

For example, a great deal of attention is paid to unit reenlistment awards, but commensurate attention may not be paid to identifying accomplishments in training. Certainly, retention merits great emphasis and acknowledgment, but a unit that takes its tactical proficiency seriously will also have high reenlistment rates in due course; and we risk sending the wrong signal when we glorify statistical achievements that may not be directly related to combat readiness. Leaders should periodically look at which acts they reward, with what frequency, and with what emphasis. If the targets are not, by and large, vital indicators of combat readiness, a reassessment is in order.

A leader conveys the right message to subordinates when he concludes important training events or readiness evaluations with award ceremonies. If we want to let our subordinates know what is truly important, we should consider the setting as well as timeliness. Outstanding gunnery skills should therefore be recognized on the range, meritorious performance at the National Training Center while still there, and so on. The battalion commander and command sergeant major (CSM) should present such awards at separate company ceremonies, explaining to all the soldiers the significance of the operation they have just conducted and letting them know that those who are being formally hon-

ored represent the efforts of the entire group.

Such prompt personnel action is possible if commanders take two steps:

First, "generic" citations should be prepared in advance of major exercises, with only the personal data left blank. The citations might read, for example, "for exceptional performance while serving as a member of Task Force 2-62 Armor during NTC Rotation...." The wording should be vague enough to fit any soldier from cook to gunner. Anyone who believes this isn't personal enough should ask himself when he last read the citation on an award he received, and should explain how the S-1 section could produce such a volume of paperwork in so short a time without taking some shortcuts.

Second, award quotas should be allocated by a battalion commander to his companies in advance of major exercises. For example, as part of a combined training center deployment order to a light infantry battalion, I informed each rifle company commander that his unit could receive up to four Army Achievement Medals (AAMs), four Department of the Army certificates of achievement, and four battalion certificates of achievement (corresponding with the rifle company's four elements—three rifle platoons plus company headquarters). Headquarters Company should receive a larger quota consistent with its larger size.

A suspense (usually within a day after the event) was established for the submission of names. All a company commander and his first sergeant had to do was meet with their leaders, work out the details, and submit to the S-1 a hand-

written list of those recommended for specific awards, and the Personnel Administration Center would do the rest.

Given the natural tendency to declare everyone a hero after a demanding exercise, and also to avoid award inflation, everyone should rigidly adhere to the numbers originally prescribed. Furthermore, if we expect the S-1 to meet a tight suspense, we can't handicap him by allowing endless negotiations over quota adjustments.

Medals and certificates do matter when issued with proper discretion. But when a soldier who has already earned the maximum promotion points for awards receives the 14th award of an AAM, we have crossed over to the ridiculous. To avoid devaluing the Army's formal recognition system, battalion commanders should have a tacit understanding with their CSMs and unit commanders on the guidelines that should be followed. (I say *tacit* because such norms must remain somewhat flexible, which is not possible if they are made explicit.) For instance, it may be reasonable to allow an extraordinary soldier to receive, in the course of a three-year tour of duty, a battalion certificate, a Department of the Army certificate, an impact AAM, and an AAM upon his permanent change of station, while an outstanding junior NCO might be recommended for an Army Commendation Medal upon his departure from home station. Awards are ultimately subjective and fair only in the eye of the beholder; while any action intended to rationalize and systematize the award of medals can easily be criticized, commanders and leaders must make some effort to prevent overkill and arbitrariness.

If we restrict our concept of rewards to formal presentations in front of unit formations, however, we forego many powerful ways of motivating units and soldiers. Imaginative officers and NCOs use a variety of instruments as incentives; for instance, writing personal letters to the parents or spouse of a soldier who has distinguished himself, explaining the scope of the accomplishment in terms meaningful to a civilian.

As a battalion commander, I wrote about 30 of these each year to the families of subordinates who had done such exceptional things as completing Ranger School or being a Distinguished Honor Graduate from the Primary Leader Development Course. Feedback from these soldiers and their families consistently indicated increased pride and commitment, on the part of both the soldiers and their families.

No merit badge, if it speaks to core combat skills and proficiency, should be handed out casually. As an example, at the first formation after a company administers the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT), any soldier who has scored 290 points or higher should be presented his fitness badge in front of his peers. The same applies to experts at weapon firing, those qualifying for dri-



ver's or mechanic's badges, and the like. To emphasize the badges' significance, the chain of command must require that they be worn on the appropriate uniforms.

Even informal personal memos from superiors can have a noticeable effect on soldiers. When I saw a squad leader training his men, or a young soldier aggressively taking charge during the chaos of a force-on-force exercise, I would make a mental note to write some brief remarks to the soldier through the CSM and the company commander or first sergeant. Beyond expressing admiration for stellar performance, such actions also announce what the organization considers important.

Recognizing a soldier can also be as simple as singling him out in front of his peers. Before monthly battalion physi-

cal training, the CSM gave me the name of one junior leader or soldier from each company who had distinguished himself in some way—a medic who had just earned the Expert Field Medical Badge, for example—and I would call these soldiers forward individually to lead a pre-arranged exercise, first explaining to the formation their particular accomplishments. Again, I was demonstrating what my priorities were.

Collective incentives can also lead to impressive results. Periodic battalion sports days that culminate in the award of a streamer for the winning company's guidon can be big team-builders when properly managed. Tactical and maintenance competition, on the other hand, can easily degenerate into gamesmanship. The rule is that the more complex and subjective the undertaking, the more wary we should be of devising comparative evaluation schemes that will lead to formal rankings and defeat the purpose of the event.

The most effective unit incentive may be time off. Its perceived value increases to the extent that a unit has a tough training regimen and keeps its soldiers productively employed. Leaders who are too liberal in granting passes will find their subordinates somewhat indifferent to the prospect of a "training holiday." But assuming that time does matter, it can be used as a reward.

The best instance is the "blotter free day." For example, a battalion policy might allow one day off to any company whose soldiers collectively tally 45 consecutive days without a military police blotter report, an off-post incident, or a positive drug test result. To do this, each first sergeant announces his unit's status at morning formation and, when an incident occurs, identifies the individuals involved and the offense that has caused the calendar to return to zero days. Signs are posted in the company areas and orderly rooms with the same information, including the names of the most recent offenders. The blotter-free day (except for critical or resource-intensive training) is then taken, without exception, on Day 46; otherwise the connection between cause and effect is lost.

Such a method, religiously enforced, can work wonders. To anyone who might remind me that I said rewards should focus on core combat skills, I say that such a policy does contribute immensely to a shared sense of responsibility for individual actions, central to the maintenance of real discipline in a unit. And more pragmatically, blotter-free days do reduce acts of poor discipline, consequently freeing leaders to concentrate on their essential business.

Small-unit leaders devising an incentives program may find the following list of techniques useful:

Don't reward an individual reward. That is, don't pile medals on top of individual merit badges. For example, the Expert Infantryman's Badge (EIB) is a prestigious award that the recipient is entitled to wear on all his uniforms, and it carries with it valuable promotion points. Leaders who offer AAMs for EIB recipients are indulging in excess, debasing the badge, and probably running their unit totals up through such unwise schemes.

Do reward leaders and the group for outstanding individual performance. Returning to the EIB example, a squad leader who has six of his eight soldiers earn the badge, or a fire team in which all four members earn it, does deserve recognition. Distinguish between individual, leader, and collective incentives.

Use the Public Affairs Office. Soldiers and their families appreciate reading about their successes and watching reports of them on television. Again, however, make sure most of the "big stories" involve hard training, not intramural sports or off-duty education, lest the image become the perceived reality.

Reward the entire team. When recognizing the team, don't forget the slice elements, task force attachments, and combat service support elements. Treat them at least as well as your own soldiers, and your team will quickly coalesce. For example, a task force or team commander should not forget to allocate award quotas to his attachments and slice elements during an off-post exercise. Include everyone in your incentive plan. Anyone who contributes to the

unit's readiness, including family support group leaders, must be given credit, formally or informally.

Use schooling as a reward. Leaders should be liberal in allowing good, qualified soldiers to attend schools. With the promotion points, added skills, time away from the monotony of home base, and associated prestige, access to specialized training is an important—and often emotional—issue within a command. A battalion commander should consider having the schools NCO work directly for the CSM instead of the S-3. The S-3 has bigger fish to fry and often gives short shrift to schools. My own experience was that a sharp sergeant, subordinate to the CSM, who was made responsible for schools—MOS testing, the Basic Skills Education Program, off-duty continuing education—did very well. Furthermore, with the CSM directly running the program, we ensured that winners, not losers, benefited. When losers benefit, cynicism and frustration quickly develop.

Reward leaders. Don't forget to reward leaders; they too are your soldiers. Beyond informal verbal or written praise, it is difficult to find an appropriate forum for formal recognition. One technique is simply to recognize leaders in the quiet of an office in the presence of a small audience (for instance, a battalion commander might present an award to a first sergeant with only his family, the other field-grade officers, the CSM, and the company commander present). This averts the embarrassment that more senior leaders tend to feel in large gatherings, and it allows the presenter of the award to express his gratitude in a much more personal way. Nevertheless, the most substantial form of recognition for a leader is the officer or NCO evaluation report. These must therefore be prepared thoughtfully, meticulously, and accurately. Anything less makes a mockery of professed commitment to junior leaders and can have a negative impact on a soldier's career.

Make significant personnel actions count. Key personnel actions such as promotions and reenlistments should be done in front of unit formations, in dig-

nified settings. Not only do we honor recipients by treating such ceremonies as major events, but we also communicate the right values to the audience and again reinforce our priorities.

Check the barracks to assess the effect of awards. A rule of thumb is that if most of the soldiers living in the barracks have their award citations and certificates displayed, they care about earning them. If few are in sight, this is a reliable indicator that something is seriously wrong with the unit's incentive system.

Disincentives

The Army's disciplinary system is well-codified in rules and regulations, taught extensively in professional development courses to officers and NCOs at every level, and continually scrutinized by the chain of command. Most leaders understand the need to ground unit justice in the concepts of impartiality, fairness, predictability, and timeliness. Most accept that leaders must be held accountable for the actions of their subordinates. Furthermore, most would agree that an effective "deterrence program" uses a full range of disincentives and sanctions to correct marginal or slightly substandard performance before more serious problems arise. Given these tenets as an underlying framework, various strategies for implementation can be devised.

The first requirement for leaders is to develop procedures for staying informed of the various disciplinary actions within the unit. Given the bewildering array of administrative, non-judicial, and legal processes that can be going on in a battalion at any one time—with each separate action involving a unique set of bureaucratic actors, most of whom the commander has little or no control over—it is only prudent to remain "hands on."

At battalion level, a well-proven way to accomplish this is the bi-monthly commander's legal update. Prepared by the S-1, legal clerk, medical platoon leader, and retention NCO (with input from the first sergeants), these sessions are used to review the entire spectrum of ongoing or anticipated adverse person-

nel actions within the unit. These include bad checks and debts and the blotter-free day status of each unit (S-1); letters of reprimand, chapter, and Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) (legal clerk); overweight program, medical boards, and soldiers on profile (medical platoon leader); and bars to reenlistment (retention NCO).

These sessions should include commanders, the CSM, the first sergeants, an S-2 representative (to keep informed of possible security clearance revocations), the chaplain, the school's NCO (who should chime in if an identified offender is projected to attend the school), and the brigade legal officer. Although such meetings are inevitably time-consuming, they are invaluable. A commander identifies problems that require his attention, a sense of urgency is imparted to all the players, and leaders gain an appreciation of the thresholds for different disciplinary actions in the battalion.

Most leaders are more or less familiar with the range of tools available for enforcing discipline, but attention to detail is absolutely essential in these matters. It is advisable for leaders, down to platoon level at least, to maintain copies of some of the many excellent legal guides distributed throughout the Army (that is, the layman, "cook-book" types). When navigating through this administrative minefield, one cannot afford to lose sight of the basics.

First, make sure the proper mix of instruments is used. For example, a commander may decide to punish a soldier under the provisions of Article 15, UCMJ, for misconduct (and must impose a flag). Beyond this, however, the chain of command may also decide to withhold favorable personnel actions (promotions, schooling, awards) beyond the immediate impact of the Article 15. If the purposes and consequences of such actions are made clear to the soldier through junior leader counseling, the lessons learned will be far stronger than if the Article 15 were administered by itself. The long-term effects of denied access to favorable personnel actions can be more damaging, and knowing this is often an effective deter-

rent to misconduct. And as we have seen, the commander's legal update provides a good opportunity to see that every effort is being made in the cases that require it.

A second fundamental is to use "non-lethal" administrative means to correct poor performance, if at all possible. Despite the effort spent instructing officers and NCOs on the intricacies of the Army disciplinary system we still frequently encounter junior leaders who do not know how to handle a substandard soldier. The laments are common: "What can I do? ... We don't have enough for an Article 15," or "I'll just have to let it go; his career will be over if he goes in front of the old man." But various alternatives are open to leaders,



short of the visit to the company or battalion commander for formal proceedings under UCMJ.

Leaving post and wearing civilian clothes, for example, are privileges that a commander can withdraw. (This should be done in writing; this documentation becomes critical when a soldier violates the directive.) If a commander decides, on the basis of past incidents, that a particular soldier should not be allowed to frequent on-post clubs, he can direct this as well. The removal of privileges, used in moderation, is powerful because of its immediacy, its target (a soldier's free time), its visibility, and its benign nature (causing no black marks in the personnel record). (By "moderation," I mean not withholding privileges either over long periods of time or in conjunction with a UCMJ action for a particular offense, although pass privileges could be removed, pending a quick decision on the disposal of a case.)

Additionally, every commander should have a formal remedial training policy, preferably reviewed and blessed by a Judge Advocate General officer. Care must be taken to see that remedial training is not used as a form of punishment. Still, failure to attain well-defined standards of training and basic soldiering justifies Saturday morning sessions that are specifically intended to correct the identified shortcomings. For instance, a squad leader should have soldiers who routinely fail to complete morning runs, and who score below 60 points on the APFT two-mile run, attend remedial training consisting of jogging and aerobic exercises. Similarly, imaginative junior leaders can develop regimens for soldiers who fail to maintain their vehicles and weapons properly, fall short on MOS proficiency tests, fail to keep up the appearance of their rooms, and so forth. Potentially good soldiers will quickly respond to the extra instruction and the threat to their free time.

On the other hand, a leader who has gone the distance for a subordinate, using his own time to supervise remedial training, has produced a convincing argument to begin separation procedures if the soldier does not adequately respond. Implementing such a program is admittedly difficult. It is sometimes hard to convince junior leaders that spending Saturday mornings working with a substandard soldier will usually solve the problem one way or another (by achievement or elimination), thereby saving months of headaches and distractions. Personally, as a commander, I had only marginal success in gaining acceptance and using remedial training, but the outstanding results in those few instances where it was practiced by aggressive junior leaders convinced me it is effective.

The following are some additional guidelines that unit commanders and their leaders should consider in developing disciplinary systems:

Don't attend to discipline problems during prime time. During the duty day, leaders should be supervising training and maintenance. Officers and NCOs should spend this time with their good soldiers, not a few bad ones. The

moral of the story becomes even clearer to those who change into civilian clothes at the end of the duty day when they see one of their peers, with their chain of command, still in BDUs queued up outside the commander's office. Furthermore, junior leaders themselves tend to become less tolerant of their subordinates' indiscretions as they see their own free time being eroded.

Establish clear procedures for administering Article 15s. Well understood and followed SOPs for administering UCMJ actions save time and reduce errors. Some ideas: The S-1 should attach the flag to the Article 15 (and all adverse actions requiring one, for that matter) as a cross-check for himself and the commander. Most units have the first sergeant or SGM perform the initial reading and explain the punishment (if any) after the fact; this is an excellent technique as it guarantees consensus between the commander and his "top soldier." Choose an appropriate location—if the commander's office is too small, use a classroom or conference room. The commander must ensure (and make clear to the soldier before him) that the process is, first, to determine whether the offense was committed and then to decide upon punishment. Each member of the chain of command present at the proceedings should be required to recommend to the commander the punishment that should be imposed and why; this is excellent training for junior leaders, and it makes them more accountable for the outcome. If extra duty is not tough and visible, it has little value as a deterrent. Post Article 15 results on the bulletin board to get the word out.

Use junior leader counseling records as vital input for adverse action decisions. About the second time a platoon leader or platoon sergeant is told that his commander will not consider his recommendation for the separation of a soldier because the counseling record is inadequate, counseling will improve. Until leaders can show they've done their part in working with their subordinates, the responsibility should still be theirs.

Don't baby-sit or coddle. The con-

verse of the above is, don't allow extended substandard performance. Junior leaders want to believe they can turn around even the most hopeless cases. In one out of every 100, they can; but considering the leader time wasted, these aren't attractive odds from a collective point of view. Ultimately, we are a volunteer force that can ill afford to experiment with social engineering.

Watch for unit trends. In a small unit, multiple incidents of poor discipline in a brief time are almost invariably a sign of poor leadership. Talk with the good soldiers in the group and get to the bottom of it. Hold supervisors accountable, and note on their efficiency reports their inability to maintain order. To the company commander who defensively asks his battalion commander how a squad leader can possibly know if one of his soldiers is going to go AWOL, I would respond, "Would you be able to pick up warning signals from, say, your first sergeant or platoon leaders before he went AWOL?" The answer should obviously be "Yes," and a squad leader must be held to the same standards of responsibility for his own immediate subordinates.

Don't make a physical "profile" an attractive option. If being on profile is perceived as a good deal, the number of "injured" will increase, and morale will drop. Honor profiles, but don't allow the soldiers on profiles to become the "stay-behind" regiment. Only in rare instances is a soldier unable to go to the field and at least pull radio watch; the healing time for these soldiers is usually shorter than for those who remain in garrison. (Peer pressure does have recuperative powers). Additionally, under no circumstances should those who have just completed an extended exercise pull duty while those who have not participated take leave. Elevate the status of those who have done their jobs.

Be aggressive on drug testing. Commanders should fight for every drug screening quota they can get, periodically use dogs, and occasionally check privately owned vehicles. Be utterly random (screen the same company on two consecutive Mondays); tell no one in advance, except the leader who

must pick up the test bottles; and ensure that correct procedures are being followed. As to this latter point, I was once informed by a Criminal Investigation Division agent that a group of soldiers in a particular company was using bleach to foil the test. Although the company commander and I were incredulous, draconian measures were used during the next screening round to guarantee compliance with the rules. The results were four positive tests in a unit that had come up "drug free" for months. Our soldiers come from a society where controlled substances are used casually, and a lot of money can be made in cocaine and marijuana sales. A chain of command that is smugly confident there is no substance abuse problem will one day face a rude awakening.

It is fair to say that the policies that make up a system of incentives and disincentives will vary from unit to unit, according to the style of the commander, the guidance from higher headquarters, and the nature of the mission. In all instances, however, their effectiveness can be measured by several things: the link between rewards and performance that contributes to war-fighting potential; the appropriateness and deterrent effect of punishment; and the degree to which the system strengthens cohesion. Most of this discussion aims at meeting these criteria. Leaders who work hard to ensure that their use of rewards and corrective action is primarily directed at building combat readiness will probably lead well-trained and well-disciplined units.

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