
TAKING CHARGE:

Three Elements of Successful Leadership

CAPTAIN THOMAS A. FIELD

All Soldiers find themselves in leadership positions on occasion. For some, the opportunity to lead is rare. Others have led troops almost constantly. Whether a Soldier commands a battalion, company, platoon or squad, certain elements remain constant. A unit with intelligent leaders who create a cohesive culture should be the goal of any leader.

Establish a Vision. As a leader, make sure you have a vision of where you would like your unit to be. The vision should be clear, realistic, and well-known throughout your unit. A squad leader's vision can be much more specific than a battalion commander's. For example, a squad leader's vision may entail a certain APFT average and certain training events at a certain frequency. A battalion commander's vision entails larger blocks of training, but may also include events that affect the individual, such as marksmanship. Often, parts of your vision have been dictated to you by your higher commander's vision.

The absolute key to success in establishing your vision as leader is ensuring that your Soldiers subscribe to it. If the vision is clear, realistic, and well-known, but no one agrees with it, it will never come to fruition. When taking charge of your unit, communicate the vision in terms that make it attractive to your subordinates. If part of your vision is that all Soldiers will score above 270 on the APFT, it may be beneficial to remind your Soldiers why this unit must exceed the Army standard to such a degree. If part of your vision is that the unit members will spend time together in social activities, Soldiers will more readily agree if they understand why this is so important to you.

Perhaps the best way to ensure that Soldiers "buy" into your vision is to establish their trust quickly. You must make

an attempt at doing so the first day on the job. This may mean no more than telling them why you are interested in the success of the unit and in their personal well-being. Undoubtedly, an opportunity to show that you will take care of your Soldiers in the right way will present itself quickly.

Consider the Culture. All units have a culture. Culture is dictated by many variables including job function, ethnicity, religion, age, experience, mindset, and leadership. As the unit leader, you will find it undesirable or impossible to change many of these variables. However, a unit's culture will change for better or worse, sometimes rapidly, with the right or wrong leadership.

You may find certain aspects of your unit are undesirable and others are exactly what you want. By communicating your vision clearly and seeking that crucial "buy-in" from your Soldiers, you can often change a unit culture almost overnight. For example, a new platoon sergeant might communicate that while he is extremely pleased with the platoon's APFT average and that they won the land navigation competition earlier, the physical appearance of many of the Soldiers is not what it should be. By explaining why he finds appearance important, the NCO will gain the assent of many Soldiers and the reluctant compliance of a few. In addition to seeing improvements in the appearance of his Soldiers overnight, the platoon sergeant has changed one small aspect of his platoon's culture into one that seeks excellence.

Surround yourself with capable people. All successful leaders rely on their subordinate leaders to share the burdens of management. Subordinate leaders are not always in formal leadership positions or are in leadership positions far below their

abilities. Sometimes a Soldier who lacks in certain areas is the best Soldier in the unit in others.

Seek individuals who, by their reputations or by their actions, have proven themselves capable of making your vision a success. A platoon leader's radio operator should be the most intelligent private or specialist he can find. A mechanized battalion commander's gunner doesn't have to be the battalion master gunner, but he does have to be able to read a map and speak coherently on the radio. A platoon sergeant can find a very able specialist or sergeant and entrust them with MILES gear operations for the entire platoon. A squad leader can find a computer genius in his squad who can produce forms and checklists that may benefit more than just the squad.

By entrusting these subordinates with shared leadership duties, a leader builds a culture in which success is commonplace because the Soldiers have a stake in unit success. Instead of subordinates, the Soldiers in your unit will become followers, subscribers to a common vision. Instead of running the unit, you will find that the unit runs itself under your guidance.

These three elements of success as a leader are intertwined; each affects the others constantly. The leader's vision is the driving force of the unit, but only when he establishes a culture that accepts and owns the vision. This is done partially by sharing the burden of the vision with able subordinates, who actively seek excellence with minimal guidance.

Captain Thomas "Andrew" Field, an Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, is a reservist in his second company command. He has also served as both mechanized and scout platoon leader. An assistant professor of Military Science at Northwestern State University, Field is pursuing a graduate degree in Educational Leadership.
