

Dignity or Disdain: How We Think About, Act Towards, and Develop New Soldiers

By COL Bryan Hernandez, CDR 165th INF BDE

A little while ago, I was sitting in a mess hall watching a new group of Soldiers in training and the events that unfolded as I sat there caused me to ponder if we are setting the correct conditions for new Soldiers to learn and develop due to the way we perceive them and the manner in which we act towards them in training. The Basic Combat Training Company I observed was seated at their long tables, weapons on the ground, busily eating their lunchtime meal. There was no talking or chatter as the 200 plus new recruits ate. The company's Drill Sergeants walked sternly by the tables observing the Soldiers without much fanfare. There were a few mild tone comments to eat quickly so that the Soldiers could get back out to training but nothing more. The professional tranquility portrayed by the cadre could be seen in the quiet determination of the new recruits eating. The Soldiers were composed as they looked focused to complete the simple task of finishing their meal so they could continue training in their mission to become a US Army Soldier. Suddenly, another company entered the mess hall and the sounds of their Drill Sergeants took control of the relative calm. The serene atmosphere faded rapidly as angry shouts telling privates to "shut up and get your food" created an uneasy environment for all those in line and those seated. The fact that the Drill Sergeants were yelling at the privates was not disturbing because it is normal in the indoctrination process into the military. However, the tone and approach of the cadre towards the Soldiers was vividly different and unsettling. The orders and comments by this group of cadre did not portray an image of tough NCOs enforcing rigid discipline, but rather a caustic attitude towards their recruits, a stark contrast to the company I had been previously watching. The Drill Sergeants were openly berating the Soldiers and displaying an attitude that did not reflect a responsibility to train or mentor Soldiers, but one that demonstrated contempt for a group of young Americans who had volunteered to serve their nation.

I surveyed the reaction of the group of Soldiers sitting down and saw that they had suddenly become jittery and watched as the first group of Drill Sergeants turned to look at the newly arrived cadre, their own peers, with amazement. These Drill Sergeants instilled a different relationship between themselves and those under their charge that seemed based on fear and contempt. Unfortunately, they failed to understand that they were undermining a relationship pivotal in creating an environment where Soldiers can learn and feel a sense of worth and purpose. And then it became all too clear to see that one group was going to learn in Basic Training and one was not. The difference is treating someone with ***Dignity*** or ***Disdain***. Dignity is an innate right to respect and ethically treat others. Dignity demonstrates a moral requirement to actively assist one another in achieving greater things. The famous enlightened philosopher, Immanuel Kant, wrote that "Morality, and humanity as capable of it, is that which

alone has dignity”. Conversely, disdain is a lack of respect accompanied by a feeling of intense dislike. When someone is treated with disdain, they learn nothing because they are treated as inferior or worthless. The first group of Drill Sergeants treated their Soldiers with dignity, it was apparent in the way they carried themselves and the way they talked with their Soldiers. They were all focused and professional. The language and attitude displayed by the second group demonstrated a contrary manner of behavior where their leadership did not comprehend their role as trainers and mentors nor understand its negative impact on learning.

In Today’s society we are witnessing changes in both the social and moral fabric of how we treat one another. Profanity, confrontation, and a general lack of respect towards others are more prevalent in everyday American life and promoted in media outlets such as reality television and the internet. The cost has been the degradation of traditionally held values and standards amongst our youth. In the Army it has become especially problematic reversing this trend as we recruit new Soldiers from throughout this nation, raised under these current conditions, and bring them into an environment built upon moral character traits that promote respect, integrity, and values. Many young men and women join the military because they are looking to join an organization that is pledged to high standards and inculcated with members that have them. They are seeking respect and a sense of worth. Our responsibility as leaders is to deliver the needed ingredients to develop a future Soldier who can espouse our organizational values and, more importantly, live them in both peacetime and combat. To achieve this they must be treated with dignity, not disdain. It has been said that no team can win a championship with a coach that fails to inspire them to achieve greatness. The same maxim holds true for developing an Army.

How to develop a Soldier to meet our Army goals and standards is dependent upon the method we treat and act towards them in training. Many would state that training must be hard – a valid argument to properly prepare our young men and women for the rigors and harshness of war. However, there is a difference between being “hard” and being callous. Soldiers do not respond nor learn in an environment permeated by cadre that treat them poorly. If we look back into our own past as students in school, we can probably discern which class and teacher taught us the most in our preparation for adulthood and life. I would guess that we would all pick the teacher that held us to the highest standards, took interest in our learning, and treated us with respect and dignity. There is no difference in training a civilian to become a Soldier. Unfortunately, there are those individuals who become detached from their Soldiers and contemptuous in their attitude towards training them. The question is why?

Cadre treat Soldiers poorly when two things occur, first they lose sight of their duty to serve as a role model and mentor who is responsible for both the individual and collective development of their Soldiers. Secondly, cadre members treat new Soldiers badly when they

mentally separate themselves from their Soldiers through a process that dehumanizes them and reduces their importance to the organization. This unfortunate process begins when cadre view recruits as unworthy or beneath them. It occurs when we fail to exhibit the very traits we advocate as an organization and we become the enemy ourselves. It is a similar process that our Soldiers face in combat when dealing with stress and the myriad of dangerous operations that involve separating friend from foe in a counter-insurgency environment. The process starts slowly by the language and names we choose to address new Soldiers or outsiders to the organization. It starts by the mannerisms and attitude we have when dealing with them on a daily basis. Instead of treating them with dignity, we treat them with disdain. The result is an environment that fails to promote learning or imbue the moral traits desired by our Army. Ask yourself how can anyone learn in an environment of disdain? You cannot and therefore we will fail at our mission if we allow it to exist. We need to be aware that the words we use, the way we talk to new Soldiers, and our general temperament towards them has a direct impact in how well they will learn. Talking down to Soldiers, to include the use of excessive foul language, does not develop them but rather displays both ignorance and a lack of standards by their leaders.

A recent letter circulated throughout the leadership of Initial Entry Training from a relative of a Soldier that graduated Basic Combat Training illustrates some of the challenges we are facing in being proper role models for our newly enlisted Soldiers. The relative came to the Soldiers' graduation and was dumbfounded by the change in behavior and foul language used by the Soldier with his battle buddies and his family throughout the day. The relative wrote that she was embarrassed by the amount of profanity her nephew used and saddened by the Army's failure to live up to its promise to instill core values and high moral standards into its new recruits. The relative was absolutely correct, we as leaders and role models had failed. The reason we failed is because we ourselves did not live up to our own values. Soldiers learn from their leaders, they watch everything we say and do. We cannot teach what we do not practice every day in their training.

As we, as an Army, continue on this endeavor to transform our nations' youth into American Soldiers, I offer a few key points for those charged with the development of our future generation of guardians. We must set the standard in everything we say and do. This requires the highest level of self-discipline and constant work to ensure we are living up to the expectations new Soldiers have of us as their teacher and mentor. The Soldiers you train are young, impressionable, and unassuming as they leave their former lives behind to join an organization ingrained in values and integrity and fortified by discipline and standards. They expect to join the most professional military in the world, as do their families and this nation. They look to you as their role model. They aspire to be you one day. They expect to learn. They expect training to be tough and their cadre tougher. They look to you to teach them everything.

They seek respect. They learn when mentally and physically challenged and given an environment that promotes excellence and self worthiness. They seek the extraordinary. All this is possible when certain conditions exist, first, we demonstrate the values and professionalism we teach and, most especially, we treat them with dignity.