

The Army Has Introduced a New Leadership Value. Here's Why It Matters

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Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. James C. McConville, speaks during a congressional breakfast during the Association of the United States Army's 2019 Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., Oct. 15, 2019. (U.S. Army photo/Dana Clarke)

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Humility.

Straight out of the classrooms and lecture halls of the Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) and School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, comes a word that is meant to inspire a new kind of leadership. Jim Collins, author of "From

Good to Great," spoke to 1,200 future military leaders about his decades of research on what influences the most successful companies and institutions.

The distinguishing factor of the most successful organizations and those just below them, he shared, comes down to having what he calls a "Level 5 Leader." While "Level 4 leaders" have effective leadership skills but are more focused on their own egos, Collins describes Level 5 leaders as those who take responsibility when the institution suffers. He pointed to those who sustain the institution when it succeeds. In other words, it all comes down to a leader's ego.

"Humility" has since become a point of conversation within the school and among families in the community. Recent changes to Army doctrine on leadership development sparked dialogue, as humility was introduced alongside empathy as necessary leadership attributes. And it's in the service's doctrine. "A leader with the right level of humility is a willing learner, maintains accurate self-awareness, and seeks out others' input and feedback," according to Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22.

What, then, does it mean to lead America's military and care for its families with humility?

At the 2019 Association of the United States Army conference, then-acting Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy and Army Chief of Staff Gen. James C. McConville announced that people would be their number one priority as the service's top leaders. How do they aim to do that? Empower the force by providing members with more autonomy, and model humility by promoting the overall health of the people as the strength of the organization. Rather than dismissing families by putting "the needs of the Army first," McCarthy and McConville modeled the power of conversation at the conference. In essence, one could see this as an attempt at Level 5 Leadership.

McCarthy and McConville are publicly addressing topics such as how people are managed, seeing value in talent as well as issues that affect the family like housing, permanent change-of-station moves, spouse employment, child care and more.

The Army's new talent management system is an excellent example of how one change can impact almost every goal on the service's list at once. The Assignment Interactive Module version 2, or AIM 2.0, rolled out this year as an online portal for service members to advertise their knowledge and skills by uploading a resume and rank preferences for their next assignment. Meanwhile, units across the globe assessed their needs and searched the portal for individuals who met them. Affectionately referred to as "The Marketplace," the portal acts as a sort of Match.com for the military. In other words, military families were given more control over their future than ever before.

Fort Leavenworth families are experiencing this new marketplace first-hand as its more than 1,200 families await new assignments, as happens every December. In the months leading up to assignment distribution, soldiers were encouraged to sit down with their spouses and complete their profile in the marketplace. In case anyone questioned the new idea or the ability of leaders to follow through, McCarthy issued a directive that everyone, every branch, was expected to utilize AIM 2.0 in their assignments process -- no exceptions in order to test the first phase of the launch.

Access to child care; medical needs; the spouse's future career opportunities and more could finally be considered as soldiers accessed the portal for open assignments and ranked opportunities that would best serve career and family. Transparency was introduced in a once-bureaucratic system, where families previously could only submit three top location preferences and wait for someone they didn't know behind a desk to determine their future.

While AIM 2.0 does not guarantee that a family will get their preference, it did create more conversation than ever before between the soldier and the units they desire to work with. At Fort Leavenworth, students and their spouses attended parties and networking events, and unit commanders looking for talent openly interviewed candidates. Conversations turned into handshakes. Handshakes often turned into orders.

So what was the response from spouses on this new approach to the assignments process? After all, McConville and McCarthy are publicly acknowledging the stress of PCS moves on families and marriages.

While much of Fort Leavenworth still awaits actual orders, leaders are strongly encouraging spouses to participate in the process. Being one step removed from their family's destiny is perhaps a spouse's most stressful experience, especially when the possibility of secondary income, support, school options for children and more are dependent on where the next assignment is.

"Whether we get our first pick or not, participating in the decision process as a couple, the ability to network with assignments that actually want us there and having a say in whether it is a place that is good for our family, improves morale and faith in the institution as a whole once again," one spouse said.

The new AIM system may not give the family their first choice, but it does offer a strong possibility of getting one of their picks.

Non-military experts are also highlighting the importance of humility in leadership.

Steven Covey, son of leadership expert Franklin Covey, introduced "Speed of Trust" as a way for organizations to develop high-trust leaders. The curriculum is used by the Army's chaplain Corps at marriage retreats. Respect is one of the 13 traits that describes those

leaders.

Researcher Paul Zak then examined the neuroscience of trust by studying the levels of oxytocin (or "trust hormone") and following up with a behavioral study of more than 2,000 employees across different companies. Some of his findings? That individuals would rather trade a 20% pay raise for more autonomy over their work and the ability to choose where they use their talents and apply their energy. That's something research company Gallup has also long investigated and proven as a way to increase productivity while also raising morale.

This recent pilot launch in the Army system can restore faith in the service's leaders, but only if leaders authentically share in McConville's intent. Every military family has experienced the tyranny of serving under a Level 4 leader, but the new message coming from the top builds hope and encourages loyalty in younger generations who rightfully question blind loyalty. After all, we are learning as a society that the very best leaders are those who can trust those they have worked hard to raise up.

In the words of Star Wars's Master Yoda, "We are who they grow beyond, that is the burden of the Master."

Humility, as it turns out, is not a vulnerability. It is a necessity in warfare. To raise up the very best on the battlefield, you must know what drives them beyond love of country. It is to value their love of the family for whom they fight. To settle for anything less is to hit a personal ceiling as a Level 4 leader and risk the entire organization.

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