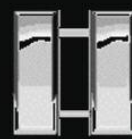




Company Command

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders
From: Company Commanders

Building a Cohesive Team

Cohesion Defined

“Cohesion is a bond of relationships and motivational factors that make a team want to stay and work together.”
(Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-22 *Army Leadership*)

“In combat, cohesive teams are the most effective.”

Have you ever been part of a cohesive team? How did you know it was cohesive? What did its leaders do to create that sense of cohesion? How did cohesion affect the unit’s performance and morale? As Soldiers, we all want to be part of cohesive teams and as leaders we want to intentionally build them, but how is cohesion developed?

Based on their own experiences, company commanders in the Company Command forum (<http://CC.army.mil>) have been talking about the best, most cohesive teams they have served in, as well as about how they foster cohesion in their units. This article shares some of that conversation and invites all of us to think about how we can be more intentional about creating cohesive, combat-ready teams.

Josh Christy

On my first deployment to Iraq, I ended up being cross-attached to a flight company from the Alaska National Guard. This unit had deployed with only one lieutenant and urgently needed another lieutenant to serve as a flight platoon leader. When the idea of me joining the unit arose, I was concerned that I would be the outsider in a tight-knit organization. Most members had lived and worked together for 10 years or longer, and they had spent the three months prior to their Iraq deployment strengthening their team and sharpening their skills during the mobilization process. The unit approached me with caution, but after I expressed a strong desire to learn and a genuine care for individuals, the unit accepted me as one of their own. Just as the unit and I found a rhythm, a crucible moment struck. On January 7, 2006, “Icy 33”—a Black Hawk with a crew from the company—crashed, killing all 12 personnel on board, including my sister platoon leader.

One of the immediate actions that both exhibited and strengthened cohesion was the courageous leadership shown by the company commander. She quickly rallied the unit to engage in a dialogue about the accident, solicited ideas for a memorial and encouraged the company to continue to ac-

complish the mission. During this initial meeting, she showed that it was OK to be vulnerable and to work through emotions associated with the accident, but she also called on us to demonstrate the resolve to continue the mission. She led the way by flying the first mission after the accident.

The unit demonstrated extreme resolve, cohesion and determination over the next eight months of the deployment. This was cohesion in action! The loss could have easily torn the unit apart or stopped it dead in its tracks. However, its “trust account” was full, and the unit persevered, grew stronger and accomplished the mission. This is how I know that I was a part of a cohesive team.

Jon Silk

Just after being extended into OIF [Operation Iraqi Freedom]-2, my cavalry scout platoon got attached to B/2-37 AR [B Company, 2nd Battalion, 37th Armor Regiment], a tank company, and we became “Team Battlecat.” We began conducting operations against the *Mahdi* militia in Southern Iraq. The more we worked together, the more we trusted each other. When we were operating in the Kufah area, for example, my scouts discovered numerous mortar positions, which we handed off to the tanks to engage and destroy. The tankers’ trust in our competence and our trust in them to support us grew with each patrol. Morale was always high when we got back from these types of missions, and there was a lot of high-fiving and sharing of stories from the engagements. The company commander was always checking on his Soldiers as well as mine after we had completed a mission. He always gave us valuable feedback, and we felt like we were accomplishing something important.

Ari Martyn

Three things stand out about the cohesive unit I joined fresh out of Ranger School:

- I believed that my unit had higher standards than other units. That is to say, it appeared to me that the unit held itself to a standard not found in sister units. I found out later that

"Team Battlecat," Jon Silk's cavalry scout platoon that got attached to a tank company during Operation Iraqi Freedom-2, moves out on a mission.

"The more we worked together, the more we trusted each other," Silk says.



the commander had a role in getting this started, but eventually it just became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

■ The leadership knew their Soldiers well—not in an intrusive way, nor in an inappropriately friendly way, but in a professional yet personal way. I was impressed with how much the leadership knew about every single Soldier, his habits, his background, embarrassing stories, etc. Also, there were a lot of nicknames, but they all were positive or funny, not demeaning.

■ There was a strong, robust welcome program. For example, I was picked up at the airport in Italy by the commander and his wife on the weekend. The senior PL [platoon leader] was waiting at the company for me, where he took me to the hotel room they had booked for me, and then took me for an orientation tour of the post and the city. That night, all the officers had dinner together. The following Monday, one of the PLs took me over to in-processing and then to draw my equipment. And this same model was copied at lower levels, e.g., for an arriving squad leader and even, to an extent, for the privates. Their welcome ritual was not hazing; rather, it was expressed as "Welcome to the team. We have tough standards, but we're going to set you up for success because we are all going to war together on the same team."

Luis Perez (USMC)

When I arrived in Afghanistan in 2009 as the battalion's mortar platoon commander, my platoon was attached to a ri-

file company. In addition to my mortar platoon, the company commander suddenly had thrust upon him EOD [explosive ordnance disposal], intelligence assets, interpreters, civil affairs teams, female engagement teams and more. For the first few weeks after landing in Helmand Province, the commander tried to manage all of the command and control by himself. However, once he realized that the team's tempo was slowing, he began delegating command and control to great effect. This allowed everyone to have ownership of the mission, which I think is the first contributing factor to a cohesive unit. This commander managed the decentralized approach by relentlessly (in a good way) overcommunicating his commander's intent and supervising our execution. In this way, he was able to give his subordinates mission-type orders and allow us freedom of movement in the pursuit of the (explicitly clear) common goal. Making sure everyone is running in the same direction is key to cohesiveness. I didn't realize until a few years into my military career just how important it is for Marines (and Soldiers) to identify with something. As we gained proficiency and began to accomplish some amazing feats, it became clear that the Marines were proud of the unit to which they belonged. It takes more than a bit of luck to make your subordinates feel this way. Challenging training,



Cross-attached to the Alaska Army National Guard's 1st Battalion, 207th Aviation Regiment, in Iraq when one of its Black Hawks crashed, killing all 12 on board, Josh Christy credits the company commander with rallying the unit and restoring cohesion.

demonstrated competence, a common goal/vision and visible success all contributed to the identity of our cohesive unit.

Matthew Giblin

This is a really important topic to me. I commanded a small unit that was manned by NCOs and civilians. It was one of the most cohesive teams that I have been part of. I found that the members of this team took a personal interest in the success of the mission. They had a strong sense of pride in the unit, and their dedication was evident in their everyday actions. There was definitely a shared responsibility in our success. I had the great experience of learning from a mentor a couple of great TTPs [tactics, techniques and procedures] for building teams. My Captains Career Course instructor shared an experience when he took his company NCOs to formulate the company's mission, vision, intent, key tasks, some measures of effectiveness—kind of a mix of mission analysis and METL [mission-essential task list] development. I did this, and it worked wonders for building the team. I gave my leaders initial guidance, and they ran with it. It gave the NCOs real ownership in the mission and its success. This process allowed us to define what it is that we wanted to accomplish together. It also gave me the opportunity to provide the company with my commander's intent, which was also the initial guidance. I also incorporated a family day at the end. The NCOs and their families got together to have a fun day with a potluck. The incorporation of the family day at the end allowed for another very important aspect of building teams: Building personal relationships is an important part of building an effective, cohesive team. The best way to know your team is to know their families. A point of pride for me was to know and remember the names of every child in my NCOs' families. Cohesion is about personal involvement, and nothing is more important to Soldiers than their families.

Joe Byerly

Commanders need to be deliberate about creating shared experiences that foster cohesion across the entire company. One method that I've seen work is company-level crucible-style events. One day a quarter, we would mix everyone in the company up into eight- to 10-man teams and throw an intense physical challenge at them for PT. One of these events was a four-mile litter run (the distance was unknown to them), with each team having to keep a Soldier on the litter at all times. By breaking up the usual task organization during the events, the guys got a chance to work with Soldiers outside their section. The event created a shared experience that went beyond the normal bonds that are formed.

Scott Safer

I am on a Security Force Assistance Team deploying in 30 days to Afghanistan. Team cohesion is paramount to our 13-

man organization. We sat down with the officers this past week and discussed this topic. One of my lieutenants wrote down his thoughts:

"In my experience, shared hardship is the most effective way to obtain team cohesion. Every individual has his 'wall' he needs to overcome, a moment when the route looks too horrid to continue. It is when a person reaches this point that his true character is revealed. The same goes for a team. If the members of a team reach this point and discover unification, they will overcome the obstacle and conquer many challenges that may come their way. If the team crumbles, it will reveal a weakness that needs to be addressed. By enduring this common struggle, teams share experiences that cannot be compared to other relationships. The team members begin to know each other's weaknesses and strengths in a variety of situations, learning how to utilize these attributes for



Jeremy Brown found that retooling his company's physical training program so the members of his team were personally involved helped foster cohesion and commitment throughout his unit.

the next task. Once a group conquers a shared hardship through teamwork, its members develop mutual trust and confidence in one another. A leader who conducts rigorous training, provides team-building exercises and accomplishes challenging missions will develop a cohesive team. During these events, however, the leader needs to instill a positive attitude and share the burden of the task. If subordinates witness their leaders not undergoing the same hardships or are not given a reasonable purpose for the task, such events may cause an adverse reaction within the team."

Lou Nemec

Building cohesion is a deliberate process that a leader must prepare for before taking command, if possible. A plan to build unit cohesion and the will to win must be drawn up and executed upon taking the guidon. I built a program called the "Rock-Hard Qualification Program," in which each of the Soldiers in the company had to pass basic measures to be qualified "Rock-Hard" and be part of the team. We developed a program that was attainable yet challenging, one



A National Guard unit was the most cohesive team for Andre Fields. The Soldiers “did everything together,” he recalls. “Even though the unit was deactivated six years ago, we still get together as a team at least once a year.”

that would develop the values I thought we needed to thrive in combat:

1. Complete a four-mile run in 36 minutes, staying in formation.
2. Complete a 12-mile ruck march in three hours, carrying a 40-pound ruck and full combat gear.
3. Complete the First Sergeant’s Board (for enlisted Soldiers) or the Commander’s Board (officers), which are basically combinations of a modified fitness test and promotion board.
4. Qualify on your assigned weapon.

We had a big ceremony to issue the company coin to Soldiers who passed all the wickets. Each Soldier was rewarded with one beer or root beer on me and the first sergeant. While deployed, I wanted to challenge my Soldiers to keep fit. I came up with the “Rock-Hard Sapper Program,” which I modified from A/2-327 IN’s [A Company, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment’s] “Iron Gator” program. Soldiers basically had to keep lifting weights in different exercises for 15 minutes straight and then run two miles in under 15 minutes. The standards were based on body weight and were gender-specific. Each Soldier who completed the challenge was considered a “Rock-Hard Sapper,” earned the coveted Rock-Hard Sapper T-shirt and was qualified to grade the challenge for others in the company. The program became very popular,

Jon Silk still carries the coin from Team Battlecat, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 37th Armor Regiment. During Operation Iraqi Freedom-2, when his cavalry scout platoon operated with the tank company, “The tankers’ trust in our competence and our trust in them to support us grew with each patrol.”



The Darker Side of Cohesion

Cohesion: Most of us presume it to be a positive commitment to the mission and to all Soldiers on the team. But imagine a tightly bonded group whose values and norms run counter to the Army’s. Is that possible?

Pete Exline: While deployed, I used a unit survey to help identify one platoon that seemed cohesive on the outside but actually had bitter trust issues. My first sergeant brought in a new platoon sergeant—a rather quiet and soft-spoken NCO who, along with the right mix of strong E-6s, did a great job of restoring trust and cohesion to the platoon.

Sam Linn: Extremely high cohesion can be great for morale and may make a yearlong deployment more palatable at the tactical level, but it can encourage groupthink and stifle diversity of ideas. In my experience, there is often an “out” group that is not being heard and can make the group difficult to work with for outside agencies and adjacent units.

Josh Christy: If cohesion comes at the expense of original thinking, creates turf wars and is destructive to relationships, then it is not the cohesion we want. Cohesion is not a goal in and of itself; it must serve the mission and foster trust for everyone.

Pete Kilner: A team is too cohesive if its Soldiers prioritize their loyalty to each other above their loyalty to Army values. Such a team risks covering up unethical behavior and dealing with it solely “in house.” Leaders must ensure that cohesive teams are as loyal to our professional values as they are to each other.

even outside the company. It seemed to work for me—that and adhering to the standard and not letting anyone in the company think they were above the standards ... EVER.

Jeremy Brown

Have a plan before taking command. I pulled some bits from the book *Taking the Guidon: Exceptional Leadership at the Company Level* about building a vision and command philosophy prior to taking my first command. Before publishing my vision, I introduced myself to the officers, NCOs and Soldiers and gave them a quick three-question survey about what they liked and disliked about the unit. I integrated their input into my vision, which became our unit road map to success. This allowed everyone to have buy-in on how we would be doing business. Another thing that helped foster cohesion and commitment happened because our division commander allowed every company in the division to send a certain number of Soldiers to get CrossFit (CF) Level-1-certified. I then retooled our physical training program so my CF-certified Soldiers could be involved. This put Soldiers who may not stand in front of a formation due to their rank in a position to be leaders and run an event. Commitment, as well as fitness levels, went up as a result. Finally, we executed a crucible-style event—a Murph (hero workout). In closing, to have a cohesive team you need some emotional buy-in from the members of the team. They have to be given something to emotionally invest in, whether it is an experience that strengthens bonds or a training event that is planned and resourced by junior officers/NCOs—and executed under minimal guidance from the commander.

Sam Linn

Intentionally fostering cohesion can be an art. Shared adversity usually works. Artificial adversity, like log PT or climbing a mountain, can work or be a disaster if poorly planned or executed, or if it takes too much focus away from other areas of emphasis. Each unit has different needs that may change over time based on mission and personnel. Having a leader who is authentic and comfortable in his or her own skin is always a good start—someone who gives the good news with the bad, shows respect by explaining why when possible, shows humility and actively distributes credit at every opportunity.

Andre Fields

The most cohesive team I have ever been on was in the National Guard. I knew I was on a cohesive team when Soldiers in the unit did *everything* together. We were like an extremely close family! Even though the unit was deactivated six years ago, we still get together as a team at least once a year. It all started with the commander. He fostered respect and loyalty within the team, and we all knew he had our backs no matter what, with no hesitation. Once we saw this, we extended that respect and loyalty back to the commander, and it permeated throughout the team. This is what I have fostered in my own company as a commander. It has

taken the unit from being in shambles to a very cohesive unit—a family.

* * *

Cohesion reinforces commitment—to each other, to the unit and to the mission. We as commanders, therefore, want to do everything we can to foster cohesion in our units. Our desire is that reading this article has caused you to reflect on the cohesive teams that you have been part of and also to think about the areas you want to improve on your current team. Currently commissioned officers are invited to continue the conversation in the CC forum (<http://CC.army.mil>).

Finally, we would like to thank Armando X. Estrada, Ph.D., from the Foundational Science Research Unit at the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences for his involvement in this article.

Recommended Reading

Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 6-22 *Army Leadership* (2012).

Sweeney, Patrick J., Michael D. Matthews and Paul B. Lester, eds., *Leadership in Dangerous Situations: A Handbook for the Armed Forces, Emergency Services, and First Responders* (Annapolis, Md.: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2011).

Kolenda, Christopher, ed., *Leadership: The Warrior's Art* (Carlisle, Pa.: Army War College Foundation Press, 2001).

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Art by Jody Harmon

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