

The Effects of Leadership Style on Recruiting

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THE EFFECTS OF LEADERSHIP STYLE ON RECRUITING

Abstract: Recruiting, in its core competency, is a sales job. Army recruiters “sell” terms of service in the Army to qualified young Americans willing to exchange a specified period of time in their lives for a benefit to be derived by service to their country. In performing this mission for the Army, recruiters are (for the most part) selected without regard for their suitability to the task; they are selected because they excelled at their last job, be it military police, medic, clerk, or tanker. While the institutional Army puts a lot of faith in its training to modify behaviors, it is oftentimes difficult to overcome the vagaries of personality and motivation when it comes to the requisite skills of Army recruiting.

Current difficulties in military recruiting have been laid at the doorstep of our excellent economy. That is, there are a lot of competing opportunities in the marketplace today for America’s quality youth, those who are medically, morally, and mentally qualified to enlist in the United States Army. A good number of analysts at USAREC headquarters are trying to figure out why those opportunities and options that have worked for us so well in the past are suddenly ineffective. While there has been a demonstrable decline in the propensity to enlist, there has also been a corresponding and keenly perceived dissatisfaction with the job of recruiting. As one veteran cadre recruiter told me, “This job used to be fun!” This same recruiter is thinking about early retirement. What is it about recruiting that has caused so many recruiters to lose heart? What can restore that heart?

While all reports demonstrate that the U.S. Army Recruiting and Retention School at Fort Jackson, S.C., does an excellent job of training new recruiters in the basic procedures and techniques of their detailed MOS, I postulate that leadership plays a critical role in providing the motivation necessary for soldiers to become excellent recruiters. Additionally, it is my contention that transformational leadership at every level, as opposed to transactional leadership, is key to the future success of the U.S. Army Recruiting Command (USAREC).

I will provide a brief description of the two leadership styles, transformational vs. transactional, and then extrapolate from recruiting research and leadership theory how one style may be more effective than the other for USAREC’s leadership. Based on the definitions of the two styles and the distribution of leadership at the various layers of USAREC, I will draw conclusions about the nature of the business and why the transformational style is more effective in recruiting than transactional leadership.

The Effects of Leadership Style on Recruiting

... Slim had enlisted in 1914, fought in the trenches and at Gallipoli, then risen, without advantages, on his own merits; his accent was respectable, no more, and he couldn't have talked down if he'd tried. You knew, when he talked of smashing Jap, that to him it meant not only arrows on a map but clearing bunkers and going in under shell-fire; that he had the head of a general with the heart of a private soldier.... He thought, he *knew*, at our level; it was that, and the sheer certainty that was built into every line of him, that gave Fourteenth Army its overwhelming confidence; what he promised, that he would surely do. And afterwards, when it was over and he spoke of what his army had done, it was always "you", not even "we", and never "I". [**Quartered Safe Out Here**, pp 36-37]

Thus writes author George MacDonald Fraser about General (later Field Marshal) William Slim, in command of British troops during the war in Burma in late 1944 and 1945, and called one of the greatest battlefield generals in English history. Fraser's admiration for his commander is evident throughout his war memoir, *Quartered Safe Out Here*, and Slim's leadership qualities shine through as the reason for his army's success. As their commander, Slim won the minds and hearts of his men, he motivated them, and he lead them to victory.

Throughout history, there have been great military leaders such as Slim, men who won against the odds, whose vision was so palpable that their men believed anything was possible. Most of these great leaders lived before modern theories were promulgated, but a study of their careers would undoubtedly demonstrate characteristics that we recognize in successful leaders today, in particular, characteristics that behavioral scientists classify as transformational leadership style.

Today's enlisted soldiers serve in more than 240 military occupational specialties (MOS). Many serve special duties beyond that of their primary MOS. One of these special duties is that of recruiting, one that is difficult precisely because it is so radically

different from the skills in which the soldier had previously excelled. Like drill sergeants, recruiters are centrally selected by the Department of the Army because they are outstanding noncommissioned officers in their MOS. Unlike drill sergeants, recruiters' primary MOS skills sets are not enhanced by training young soldiers in Basic Training or Advanced Individual Training in a particular MOS. Instead, recruiters themselves learn a new MOS.

Recruiting, in its core competency, is a sales job. Army recruiters "sell" terms of service in the Army to qualified young Americans willing to exchange a specified period of time in their lives for a benefit to be derived by service to their country. In performing this mission for the Army, recruiters are (for the most part) selected without regard for their suitability to the task; they are selected because they excelled at their last job, be it military police, medic, clerk, or tanker. While the institutional Army puts a lot of faith in its training to modify behaviors, it is oftentimes difficult to overcome the vagaries of personality and motivation when it comes to the requisite skills of Army recruiting.

Current difficulties in military recruiting have been laid at the doorstep of our excellent economy. That is, there are multiple competing opportunities in the marketplace today for America's quality youth, i.e., those who are medically, morally, and mentally qualified to enlist in the United States Army. Why are those Army opportunities and options that have worked so well in the past suddenly ineffective? Ironically, while there has been a demonstrable decline in the propensity to enlist, there has also been a corresponding and keenly perceived dissatisfaction with the job of recruiting. As one veteran cadre recruiter said, "This job used to be fun!" This same

recruiter is thinking about early retirement. What is it about recruiting that has caused so many recruiters to lose heart? What can restore that heart?

While all reports demonstrate that the U.S. Army Recruiting and Retention School at Fort Jackson, S.C., does an excellent job of training new recruiters in the basic procedures and techniques of their detailed MOS, I postulate that leadership plays a critical role in providing the motivation necessary for soldiers to become excellent recruiters. Additionally, it is my contention that transformational leadership at every level, as opposed to transactional leadership, is key to the future success of the U.S. Army Recruiting Command (USAREC).

LTG (Ret.) Walter F. Ulmer, Jr., describes transformational behaviors as inspiring teamwork, considering subordinates as individuals, being open to ideas, demonstrating moral courage, and setting the example of subordinating self to mission (*Parameters*, p. 11). The U.S. Army Research Institute (ARI) is pursuing a paradigm that identifies the transformational leadership approach as one likely to produce needed levels of both skill and will. It is the will of the soldier that interests us in the current recruiting dilemma.

Leadership: Transactional vs. Transformational

The transactional theory describes with some precision the “transaction” that goes on between the leader and the follower, essentially a fairly mechanical bargain that assumes the leader provides pay, rewards, recognition, or threats of punishment (i.e., positive and negative reinforcement) in exchange for follower services or compliance. Ralph Masi surveyed the results of this, as he called it, “negative style” in USAREC and found negative leaders would get personally involved with subordinates only when a crisis had erupted. These leaders would rely heavily on rewards and punishments as

primary sources of motivation, instead of using them as supplemental tools. Not surprisingly, Masi's study showed that recruiting production suffered under this style of leadership (*Recruiter Journal*, April 1994, p. 9).

Transformational leadership, on the other hand, focuses on the values and attitudes that are the foundation of human behavior and is, thus, more elemental in nature. According to Donohue and Hong, "The transformational leader gets followers to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the leader, team, unit or organization. The transformational leader obtains more from his or her followers than superficial change in their attitudes or minor increments in their temporary level of motivation" (*Military Leadership*, p. 43).

Donohue and Hong use a matrix that graphically displays the characteristics of both styles, listing a comparison in multiple areas:

	Transactional	Transformational
Leader's source of power	Rank, position	Character, competence
Follower reaction	Compliance	Commitment
Time frame	Short term	Long term
Rewards	Pay, promotion, etc.	Pride, self-esteem, etc.
Supervision	Important	Less important
Counseling focus	Evaluation	Development
Where change occurs	Follower behavior	Follower attitude, values
Where "leadership" found	Leader's behavior	Follower's heart

It becomes clear the differences between the two styles and why the transformational might be desired in an organization where success rests on the individual motivation of its soldiers. Recruiting is such an organization, for recruiters largely work autonomously, going back to their stations for administrative purposes.

Esprit de corps is self-generated, and it is now an established fact the recruiting is becoming more difficult in this prosperous economy. In a job as demanding as recruiting, where a soldier sells a little of himself (or herself) while selling the Army options and opportunities, constant rejection can be a powerful inhibitor.

Former USAREC commander MG Mark R. Hamilton discussed the problems of recruiter motivation in his farewell interview in the *Recruiter Journal*:

“There’s some compelling empirical data that demonstrates the equal importance of both training and motivation. If you track the productivity of [detailed] recruiters by months in the command you will see a very interesting thing. There is a significant climb in productivity from the time they report in to the command to about 12 months, there is a lesser but upper movement to about the 31-month mark, at which time there is a disastrous drop to about the level they had exhibited at the 6-month mark. Of course this latter group has gotten their orders and they have, quite frankly, quit. Not every one, not each individual, but across the command as a whole.

“But I think what really gets to them is the cumulative effects of their reactions to the disappointments and rejections over time -- in short, it beats them down. I am struck again and again with how powerful the motivation piece is,” Hamilton said.

“Even good people will choose almost anything to avoid going out to be rejected again. It’s absolutely understandable. It’s one of those areas where we don’t need more data. Peter Drucker said 25 years ago that if you find a job where two good people fail, change the job. We have a case here where we quite literally have thousands of good people fail, and I think it’s imperative that we change the job” (*Recruiter Journal*, July 1998, p.10).

USAREC has hundreds of examples where units from battalion to company to individual stations made remarkable turnarounds in production (both positive and negative) in very rapid spans of time, facts that seem to correlate to changes in leadership personnel. This change phenomenon is not just attributable to USAREC officers; it applies as well to battalion sergeants major, company first sergeants, and especially to the recruiting station commanders who are usually sergeants first class (although a staff sergeant may hold the position).

A recruiting assignment is unlike anything else the Army has prepared a soldier for, both officer and enlisted soldier. Cadre recruiters have, of course, spent several years “putting ’em in boots,” as they say. Soldiers in the ranks of sergeant through sergeant first class are selected for recruiting by their career management field because they excelled at their primary MOS. Recruiting is demanding duty, and only the best NCOs are sent to USAREC. They receive a two-month training course at the MOS-producing schoolhouse, the U.S. Army Recruiting and Retention School at Fort Jackson, and they also have a nine-month on-the-job training program once they reach their first duty station. If they are lucky, they will have a positive role model in a successful station commander, one who will teach and mentor, passing on and refining skills. Concerned and inspirational first sergeants and sergeants major can also impact how a new, young recruiter views himself, his mission, and his ability to do the job.

Officers in USAREC, on the other hand, average about two weeks of recruiting training. The jest is that they can just barely spell recruiting by the time they arrive to “take charge.” This undoubtedly poses a challenge to the most motivated officer, where literally every buck sergeant knows more than he does about the business. In other units, an officer is promoted based on his knowledge and skill, and by the time he reaches battalion command, he has held virtually every position within his unit, giving him a depth and breadth of knowledge that makes him credible as a leader. Recruiting officers are the equivalents of “summer hires.” The savvy leader will, of course, learn as much as he can about the job and the market, but (other than for medical missions) USAREC officers do not recruit. They never “carry the number” (individual mission for a specified

number of quality contracts per month). How then can they provide inspiration and motivation to junior enlisted personnel who know far more about this critical mission?

Types of Transformational Leaders

Dr. Bernard M. Bass cites three types of transformational leader, with varying qualities that bring out responses in subordinate soldiers. First, the inspirational leader who provides meaning and challenge, sets the example, and articulates the vision and goals of the mission or unit. This kind of leader will promote unit identification with a set of cohesive values and goals. The second, the intellectually stimulating leader, will encourage innovation and problem-solving, thereby increasing feelings of worth and confidence in the unit led. The third kind of leader, one who is individually considerate, also increases subordinates' feeling of self-worth by paying as much attention to the needs of their followers as to the unit mission (*Military Review*, p. 48)

Leadership in USAREC: A Recruiting Dilemma?

An argument can be made that the commanding general of USAREC ought to be the strategic planner and the inspirational leader who provides the vision and enables all recruiting personnel to do their jobs to the best of their abilities. He must also be operational capable, with a quick grasp of problems and an open mind to potential solutions. Finally, the USAREC CG must also be considerate of each soldier under his command. This is the type of leader who will ask, when out visiting his recruiting stations, "Do you have what you need to do your job?" This is the type of leader who will inspire loyalty and unit cohesiveness, a la General Slim.

Brigade commanders operate at the regional level. Their span of control is seven to nine battalions, and generally covers an enormous amount of territory. While their primary function is to execute command policies and to be the conduit of information up the chain of command, their leadership role cannot be forgotten. Each brigade area has unique recruiting problems ranging from high immigrant populations to low unemployment. The transformational leader at the brigade level will seek out ways to help his recruiters, making them understand he is paying as much attention to their needs (e.g., medical benefits problems, lack of installation support, hostile school boards, personnel issues) as he is to mission accomplishment.

It is at the battalion where the rubber really meets the road in recruiting. The battalion commander is actively engaged in recruiting activities on a daily basis. He or she conducts media interviews, meets with Chambers of Commerce and other civic organizations, is responsible for all administrative functions for his battalion, and provides the command climate. If this climate is dark and oppressive, a formerly successful battalion can plummet to the bottom of the “41 report” (the list of battalion standings in USAREC, in respect to mission accomplishment). Conversely, a positive commander can (and has been known to) raise a battalion to the top of the list in a short period of time, almost by the sheer power of his or her personality. These successful battalion commanders inspire commitment and self-esteem, provide the “can do” spirit to all battalion endeavors, and use rewards as a tool instead of a bludgeon.

The company commander and first sergeant are actively involved in the recruiting business on a daily basis. Either one or both is constantly visiting recruiting stations, local schools and centers of influence, the Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS). They

manage reports, training, and company assets. Their interface with recruiters is repeated and close, even for those who have remote stations. Their “people skills” must be finely honed to deal successfully with the public and with their soldiers. An uncaring leader at the company level is quickly identified by subordinates and either ignored or suborned. These two individuals should know every soldier’s name and condition, how many family members, where they live, what their problems are. They should profess understanding of the local market and school policies, and they should be assets a recruiter can rely upon.

The closest professional relationship in recruiting is that between a recruiter and his or her station commander. The station commander was selected for this duty because of competence and skill, and it stands to reason that a successful recruiter would have outstanding people skills. However, the same phenomenon that applies to levels of command above the station applies here. A caring, considerate, inspiring leader can accomplish great things in virtually any market. A repressive and negative leader can cause mission failure by alienating or intimidating the station’s recruiters.

There are a number of reports at USAREC headquarters that testify to the ability of a leader to affect outcomes in recruiting success, at any level. Masi’s study points out that positive leadership appears to be related to higher productivity, which in itself is a fact that should inspire leaders in USAREC to examine their personal style (*Recruiter Journal*, p. 9).

Conclusion

Recruiting personnel are committed and dedicated. They truly believe the Army mission begins with recruiting, that they must “provide the strength” for America’s

Army. They work, in general, far from the installations they trained at and are familiar with; very little of what they knew about the Army as successful NCOs in their former assignments applies to them now as recruiters. They suffer rejection on a daily, if not hourly basis, and morale in a sales environment is critical to success. In this difficult recruiting environment, it is incumbent upon USAREC leadership to support recruiters in all possible ways. It has been demonstrated that the transformational leadership style positively affects follower motivation and successful productivity. Doesn't it make sense that Army recruiting leaders at all levels should be encouraged to practice a transformational leadership style?

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