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AUTHOR Fry, John P.  
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the results of one Army officer's experiment in applying the techniques of psychological research on the job. With a view to developing his subordinates' leadership ability and initiative, and permitting them an active role in managing the battalion, he emphasized particularly the principles of "contingency management" (motivation by incentives), "participative management" (group problem-solving and decision-making), and "performance counseling." Despite some initial resistance by other officers, the experiment paid off in terms of battalion morale, which was rated high, responsiveness, and esprit de corps. Although emphasis was on self-motivation rather than the threat of punishment as a motivating force, there was no breakdown in discipline. Future development and field-testing will be needed to provide additional information for evaluating the use of such leadership techniques in the Army. (Author)

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## The Army Officer As Performance Manager

John P. Fry

HUMAN RESOURCES RESEARCH ORGANIZATION  
300 North Washington Street • Alexandria, Virginia 22314

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## **PREFATORY NOTE**

**This paper was prepared by Dr. John P. Fry, Senior Scientist at the Fort Bliss, Texas, office of the HumRRO Western Division (formerly HumRRO Division No. 5).**

## THE ARMY OFFICER AS PERFORMANCE MANAGER

John P. Fry

It is easy for Army officers to be both intrigued by and skeptical of the work that psychologists are presently doing to develop and engineer new leadership/management techniques. On the one hand, officers are not only encouraged by various commanders to develop self-initiative and self-discipline among subordinates, they are also always interested in techniques that might enable them to motivate their subordinates more effectively. On the other hand, the Army War College (1971) found that officers have been hesitant about applying psychologists' approaches in solving leadership problems; apparently, textbook techniques that appear useful at first glance just aren't practical when it comes to helping officers perform their day-to-day jobs. Thus, because of the innovative nature of these techniques, understanding of their potential payoff is necessary before their acceptance can be realized.

Recently, one officer, well-trained in and committed to innovative leadership techniques, conducted a personal experiment in bridging the gap between what is known from psychological research and what is applied on the job. Since the techniques he used are similar in many respects to those recommended by the CONARC (Emerson) Leadership Board (1971), his experiences in applying these techniques to the management of an Army battalion may have relevance to what future leadership training and practice in the Army might be.

To concentrate attention on the potential applicability of the leadership/management techniques described, the identity and personality traits of this officer are purposely ignored as much as possible. Instead, the account is focused on his skills and their consequences on the performance of his immediate subordinates.

### BACKGROUND

Our officer had acquired formal training in the social sciences (MA, Psychology; Ph.D.—all but dissertation—Sociology) and was teaching leadership at West Point, when the opportunity to command a battalion arose. He elected to determine for himself whether what he had learned and was teaching actually worked. During the 12 months of his command, he obtained complete freedom from two successive superiors to exercise leadership as he saw fit, contingent upon successful accomplishment of assigned missions.

Although the battalion had a combat mission, it was assigned numerous small support missions that kept individual line units busy, but prevented the battalion from functioning as a whole. As a consequence, unit commanders were far more critical to the battalion's success than staff officers, and this account therefore deals primarily with unit commanders. In addition, the battalion became a holding tank for Vietnam returnees, many of whom were either "shorttimers" or without relevant training; turnover ranged from 35 to 40 percent per quarter and battalion manpower varied from 65 to 90 percent of its 800-man authorized strength. Even so, field training toward the battalion's combat mission was carried out whenever possible.

Individually, the leadership techniques utilized by this officer are not novel; it is the extent and intensity of their application in a systematic and integrated manner that

makes this case study noteworthy. In fact, most Army leaders already employ several of these techniques. Some were learned by trial and error—an idea just seemed to fit the situation and it worked. Others were learned by observing and modeling the behavior of effective superiors. To improve on such inefficient methods of acquiring leadership/management skills, application-oriented training programs are under development to enable Army leaders to learn how to utilize such skills in an analytical and integrated way. It should be noted that these techniques are not meant to replace the aggressive, hard-driving, and authoritarian style of leadership necessary in combat situations; they are far more appropriate to non-combat situations, including training for combat.

Information on the techniques used by this Battalion Commander (BC) and their consequences was gathered during the last two weeks of his command and shortly thereafter by personal interviews with him and his subordinate and superior commanders. The authenticity of what follows has been verified by these same officers.

## PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IMPLEMENTATION

Our BC began his command with two general convictions: he intended to develop his subordinates' leadership ability and initiative, and he intended to grant them a far stronger voice in the overall management of the battalion. Both goals prompted him to apply the general behavior techniques of "contingency management" (motivation by incentives), "participative management" (group problem-solving and decision-making), and performance counseling. These techniques are based on the fundamental premise that a superior, through his behavior, affects, over time, the frequency of occurrence of on-the-job behaviors of his immediate subordinates—whether these behaviors are productive or counter-productive, and whether the superior acknowledges the impact of his behavior or not.

Our BC found it difficult to begin implementing these techniques for influencing behavior. Contingency management demanded that he display a great deal of patience and tolerance. In permitting his subordinates to participate fully in the running of the battalion, he had to remain committed to participation as a practical leadership technique long enough for it to take effect. New ground rules for superior-subordinate relationships had to be developed. He had to allow his subordinates to make some "dumb" (but not unacceptable) decisions in order to let them test the limits of group problem-solving and learn from their experiences. His method of performance counseling required that he accept criticism of his own behavior; for several months he did not know whether he was developing the necessary rapport and trust or just permitting pent-up hostility and frustration to surface. It was not uncommon to hear him being described as "weird" or "crazy." Most officers avoided him until they learned that his techniques were not as counterproductive as they had imagined. Discovering that he had had advanced psychological training only made some feel more uncomfortable. Also, there was kidding by officers outside the battalion—were they guinea pigs taking part in some great experiment?

The BC's behavior gradually dispelled such thoughts. In a calm, relaxed, and objective manner he slowly and steadily began implementing behavior techniques that emphasized the thinking, analyzing, and problem-solving capabilities of his subordinates.

### Contingency Management

Unlike common military practices, the BC used contingency management techniques to motivate subordinates. He would wait (when circumstances permitted) until his

subordinates behaved in appropriate ways and then reward them, rather than tell them what to do and then threaten them if they failed to do it. In fact, punishment and threats of punishment were absent by design. He neither "chewed out" his officers nor overreacted to their errors. He believed that any mistake acknowledged by his officers was, in itself, punishing enough. Instead of punishing, he engaged them in analyzing their mistakes and deriving corrective solutions. Again, he would wait for them to obtain positive results and then purposefully reward them. He used a variety of techniques: praise in front of peers, letters of commendation, praise to visitors within earshot of the subordinate—a personal touch whenever possible.

Since he placed as much responsibility and authority as possible in his subordinates, numerous occasions were available for him to take reinforcing actions. For example, he required no pre-inspections in preparation for annual inspections. Instead, he simply told his commanders to "Do what you think is best." Later, when they passed, he verbally rewarded them with references to their ability and self-initiative.

This is not to say that certain actions were not suggested; they were just not demanded. For example, the battalion mess hall needed interior decorating. This fact was well known to all the officers, but the BC deliberately refrained from requiring anyone in particular to take action. After a time, one unit commander happened to visit another battalion mess hall and decided that its decor could be surpassed. He drew up plans, determined costs, and persuaded other unit commanders to pool their unit fund money for the first time in a battalion-wide cooperative effort.

By the time the project was in the final stages, reinforcement for this display of initiative and leadership was begun by the BC, primarily by recognition in the presence of visiting officers. More important, he knew that this example would serve as a model for other officers. The next time battalion-level objectives were suggested, the probability was higher that other officers would accept the challenges.

It took some time for the subordinate officers to adjust to contingency management. With so few directives, it appeared to be easy to satisfy the BC—an abrupt change from the attitude of former commanders. They soon learned, however, to take initiative in the absence of demands; there certainly was an absence of domineering, over-supervising, or over-controlling behavior on the part of their BC. Despite such differences, there was never any doubt as to who was in command—the BC was, only not in the traditional sense.

Motivation to perform well also resulted from the BC's expressions of trust and confidence in them as competent individuals and professionals. A common statement from subordinates was, "I didn't want to let him down." None felt that their enthusiasm for getting the job done could be attributed to fear or threat of punishment, verbal or otherwise. They considered themselves to be self-motivated, although they acknowledged that the BC was in great part responsible for their being that way. Upon reflection, they realized that contingency management techniques had caused them to modify their behavior, but they felt strongly that positive changes in their behavior came from within. For example, they stated that when the BC left on trips they carried on just as if he had never left—an indication of success in developing self-initiative and self-motivation among immediate subordinates.

When it came to motivating noncommissioned officers and enlisted men, contingency management was not as effective. There were too many of them, too far removed from the BC's direct contact. (A contributing factor, of course, was the high turnover in personnel.) The BC could only try to recognize the men whenever possible and attempt to let them know that he was personally interested in them. This was accomplished by such personal actions as talking with them during meals, sending each man a handwritten note on his birthday, and remembering small personal things, and by establishing EM and NCO councils to gather information on their problems and needs.



## **Group Problem-Solving and Decision-Making**

To avoid "management by crisis" experiences, the BC constantly gathered information on the battalion's "pulse" through surveys, ratings, council minutes, rap sessions, and an open-door policy. Always, wherever or whenever someone wanted to talk with him, he was willing to listen.

Whenever he "sensed" or identified an emerging problem that he felt would be of great concern to his immediate subordinates, he would present it to them for group problem-solving. During these sessions, he would facilitate the group's examination of all sides of the issue and assist them in arriving at an acceptable decision. Sometimes, when a problem had many possible solutions, he would ask for a vote to eliminate a few, but consensus was always the goal. Rarely—only when his experience told him the battalion might suffer too much—would he veto a decision.

Because he always maintained a relaxed, analytical, problem-solving approach, subordinates did not feel threatened or embarrassed by letting him know their ideas or feelings. His goal was to facilitate problem-solving to the extent that subordinates would want to return whenever any of them had identified another problem of similar magnitude. Even though it was possible that trivial problems would be brought up by the group, in practice very few were. In fact, officers frequently made use of the BC's problem-solving skills to help solve particularly difficult problems within their units.

By having his subordinates take part in trying to solve many battalion-level problems, the BC eliminated the need for selling final decisions. That is, because problem-solving decisions were being made by those who had to carry them out, acceptance of decisions and commitment to making them work was high. Further, when feedback was received, changes or modifications were easily made and accepted. In this way, although to outsiders the BC might appear indecisive, group problem-solving and decision-making helped him and his subordinates maintain open minds to the consequences of their decisions, and the necessary flexibility to react to new problems or needs of the battalion.

For example, on one occasion they decided to issue orders removing the requirement for the command "AT EASE" to be given when officers entered the mess hall. Soon afterwards, they reconsidered and reversed their decision, mainly because junior officers found it led to confusion in other contexts. Such incidents, although trivial, soon gave subordinates proof that they had a remarkable amount of influence on how the battalion was run.

In general, a "best-working" hypothesis existed for every decision that was made. The BC was quite willing, and expected, to have others experiment with new solutions, especially to old, recurring problems. At first this tactic disconcerted some officers, but they soon recognized the merit of such policies. Innovative solutions to problems were frequently proposed, adopted, revised, and tried again.

## **Performance Counseling**

Another means of facilitating effective communication between the BC and his subordinates was through use of frequent, informal, performance counseling sessions. Such meetings lessened subordinates' anxiety about how their performance on the job was being evaluated, while at the same time the BC gained vital information about their reactions to his behavior as well as about their "trivial" problems.

His basic approach to being allowed to know about "trivial" problems was to accept any idea, suggestion, or feeling that anyone brought forth—even though he might not agree with or approve of it. Then he would engage the individual in a joint exploration of the meaning and implication of his verbalization.

Often he would facilitate a subordinate's problem-solving by serving as a sounding board, by asking leading questions, by suggesting solutions that had worked for him, or



by helping the subordinate analyze his strengths and weaknesses. These techniques were similar to those used in group problem-solving sessions. It was only because officers had learned to trust him in those sessions that they knew they could openly express their feelings with impunity. They remembered well previous commanders who were only too quick to admonish them for signs of weakness or "confessions" of letting performance slip. Under this BC, their shortcomings became topics for problem-solving.

In contrast to typical counseling situations, in which both commander and subordinates are embarrassed and anxious, subordinates looked forward to being counseled—some even requested it, frequently during luncheon meetings. Even formal performance-counseling sessions were welcomed because they provided opportunities for being commended (reinforced) for good performance and redirected where shortcomings were mutually discovered. Officers knew that the BC could help them identify areas in which they could begin to learn to improve and develop themselves.

In general, the BC never gave up on a man; he always felt that, with patience, one could learn from one's mistakes and change behavior for the better. He knew a superior should never cause a subordinate to "lose face." If he saw an officer do so while disciplining an EM, the BC would back up the officer, but would arrange to counsel him on the matter later.

The BC had a characteristic approach to handling discipline problems. When an enlisted man was brought before him for "field grade" punishment, instead of administering a "chewing out" he would begin by using non-directive counseling techniques to get the man to reveal his individuality—identify his problems, explain his motives, and verbalize his ambitions and expectations. Subsequently, he would elicit from the man the need for rules and regulations. Then problem-solving was introduced as a means of avoiding future trouble. Finally, the man was told that he would be punished in accordance with Army regulations; the BC's actions could not be described as "permissive."

### Guidance

Usually, Officer's Call was held at a local Officer's Club so that an informal atmosphere could be created—especially with the help of a little beer. There, the BC often "guided" his officers by having them translate leadership principles and ethics into common everyday actions. His only input was to ask leading questions and facilitate group discussion. The focus was on their identifying behaviors that make up such traits as honesty, integrity, self-discipline, initiative, and high standards. Since the BC's behavior was an exemplary model of what was being discussed, he had no need to use charismatic persuasive tactics or inspirational exhortation on his subordinates.

It was obvious to the interviewer that due to these sessions and other behavior on the BC's part, guidance goals were approaching fulfillment. For instance, all unit commanders stated that they had become completely honest in their interpersonal relations with the BC. These statements were corroborated by the fact that the interviewer could find no discrepancy between the BC's perception of his subordinates' intentions and their perception of his. In other words, communication between superior and subordinates appeared to be 100% accurate.

### Leadership Development

Although most officers copied the BC's techniques because they were pleased with the results (especially counseling), their own efforts were not as productive. The BC's philosophy was partly responsible. He sought to develop his subordinates as leaders, but did not demand conformity to his own style. Although he certainly influenced their leadership style while counseling them about their effectiveness as commanders, he

refused to go beyond suggestions and setting the example. As a consequence, they never fully understood many of his techniques.

For example, during Officer's Call, the BC initially insisted that all officers attend a preliminary half-hour meeting to openly and frankly discuss common individual and battalion problems. Then he would enter the meeting and solicit from a spokesman their complaints or suggestions, but without knowledge of who was the source of the information. This method had potential merit in getting them to identify problems without fear of evaluation. However, it resulted in arguments and hostility, especially between line officers and staff, because they weren't knowledgeable in group problem-solving and conflict-resolution techniques. Instead, they tried to decide issues by voting. This "I win; you lose" format, rather than leading to an understanding of each other's needs and limitations, only led to contempt for their commander's leadership philosophy, shown in jokes like, "Let's vote to see who's the BC!"

In general, subordinate commanders felt that they were not as knowledgeable and skillful in day-to-day interactions because they lacked sufficient practical and analytical training. Nonetheless, they acknowledged that the BC's corrective feedback and guidance helped them develop their leadership and management capabilities much more effectively than their previous, unsystematic method of trial and error.

### **Discipline**

The test for discipline is to remove the leader and see what happens. If, as in this case, subordinates carry on competently, you have discipline—or, to be more precise, self-discipline.

In addition to the techniques described, the BC had also identified, during his military career, three discipline-developing activities he felt so strongly about that they were his only policies not open for discussion or change:

First, a daily mile run.

Second, dismounted drill at least once a week. The purpose was to maintain discipline necessary for quick response to commands in emergency situations, like riot control.

Third, weekly attendance at Command Retreat formations. Such ritual and ceremony, he felt, provided a necessary emotional link with other military units, with the Army's historic past, and with loyalty to the Constitution.

In time, these activities became worthwhile in themselves. His men admitted that, given the option, they would have voted to retain these activities.

### **PERFORMANCE PAYOFF**

Now that we have noted the BC's techniques, the big question remains: "What was the payoff in performance?" In other words, how was this battalion commander rated?

Although several standard command indicators, such as AWOL and delinquency report rates, were no better or worse than for other comparable battalions, lack of lower rates can be attributed, at least in part, to the high personnel turnover and a corresponding lack of time for the techniques employed to take hold on "short-timers." Furthermore, because the BC refused to permit battalion resources to be used to assist any one unit to look especially good during inspections or other post-wide competitions, units of the battalion did not stand out any more than would be expected.

Morale indicators, though, were quite high. The Group Commander, for example, said, "Morale was just that much more noticeable for the better in [this] outfit than among any of the other outfits I had." He went on to explain that he could recognize a

man from this battalion because he "looked you in the eye" and was "willing to talk" rather than answering in a contemptuous, non-responsive, or subservient manner sometimes characteristic of men from other battalions. He felt that these men also exuded purposiveness and self-initiative that appeared to him to be spontaneous and directly attributable to the BC's influence.

The battalion came to be recognized on post, especially to Group S-3 and Center G-3, as a unit that would complete every mission assigned to it in an outstanding manner. Critical school missions, such as supporting a Japanese field test, were purposely assigned to this battalion because it had a history of always being responsive, competent, and thorough.

As a result of these activities, the men strongly identified with the unit and esprit de corps was high. For example, a civilian visitor to the post happened to pick up a hitchhiking soldier. When asked what unit he was in, the soldier replied, "Colonel \_\_\_\_\_'s battalion, sir . . . the best battalion on post!" According to the Group S-3, in comparison to other battalions this battalion, down to the lowest levels, always presented a professional "can do" attitude.

When the men were interviewed by the BC as they were about to leave the battalion, the vast majority assured him that he was running the battalion in the right way. In fact, most officers and junior NCOs embraced the BC's leadership techniques. At least four officers stated that they had decided to remain in the Army, specifically because of their experiences under his command.

## COMMON FEARS AND DOUBTS

Upon hearing about this BC's leadership techniques, officers frequently express several commonly held doubts or fears. Let us consider whether such fears are justified.

Many officers are convinced that a certain distance should be maintained between superior and subordinates. Yet to do a good job of counseling and problem-solving, one has to really understand what subordinates think and feel. Getting "close" enough for trust and two-way communication does not require becoming "drinking buddies." It does require developing and maintaining an environment where the consequences of honesty and cooperation *on the job* are reinforcing to all participants. In this battalion, actions were not taken unilaterally; instead there was a sharing of information to the benefit of all.

One can become "too close," of course, to special groups. The battalion EM council, for example, once got the BC's OK to revise mess hall dress standards to allow T-shirts and no socks. Soon afterwards, the officers were able to convince the BC that the battalion EM council was not representative of the battalion as a whole and was usurping the chain of command. As a consequence, the BC became more circumspect in accepting EM council suggestions; he also advised unit commanders to begin their own EM councils to head off further conflicts in the chain of command.

Related doubts arise from the use of participative management or group problem-solving. Upon granting subordinate commanders freedom to propose solutions to battalion-wide problems, many commanders fear that they would lose control and that wild, irresponsible decisions would occur. In practice, the BC maintained control and elicited many excellent and innovative solutions that were later adopted. Counter-productive solutions just did not pass the critical review of involved problem-solvers. In fact, there was general agreement among both subordinates and superiors of the BC that participative management would pay off, even in combat, where units are often scattered and should be able to function somewhat independently. What better training than that which conditions subordinate commanders to think for themselves, to solve

problems on their own, and to learn from their mistakes before actual combat? In the opinion of this group, only emergency situations, where time is short, require a more authoritarian style of leadership.

Many officers perceive such policies as permissive and fear a breakdown in discipline. At times, this BC had to take direct action to correct similar misconceptions among his men. For example, after a battalion-level meeting emphasizing black freedoms, several black EMs tested the BC's intentions by cutting in ahead of others in the mess line. When they then became insubordinate to an NCO who corrected them, the BC did not hesitate to have them punished, immediately after espousing ideas of openness and trust.

It was not uncommon for senior NCOs to be upset with what they regarded as "permissive" methods of operation. Men who had been conditioned by many years of experience within an authoritarian environment found it difficult, in most cases, to understand alternative methods of motivating subordinates. First, such men believed firmly in the myth that discipline is a result of such techniques as expertly delivered tongue lashings or threats of punishment. Second, most of them were so used to obeying orders that the less-structured environment, and the demands on self-direction, caused some to become uncomfortable and resistant to change. Nonetheless, by the time the BC departed, most senior NCOs had come around to seeing the advantages of his methods of motivation—not by being persuaded, but by observing and experiencing the positive consequences.

Many officers doubt that they would have enough patience and tolerance to be sufficiently disciplined in the use of these techniques for influencing behavior. For example, this approach demands patience with incompetent performance. Such behavior is inconsistent with the image of the hard-driving, aggressive commander. However, even when our BC lost control of his emotions, his past patience in using behavioral techniques paid off. In two cases that were cited, he immediately received constructive and objective feedback (counseling) from other, non-involved officers. In other words, when subordinates learn to operate under behavioral-based leadership techniques, they become so accustomed to using the ground rules and being reinforced that they themselves are quick to enforce the rules—even on their own commander. In fact, training one's immediate subordinates in these techniques is the only guarantee that one can remain disciplined in their use.

Nonetheless, most changes in behavior do not occur quickly unless punishment or threat of punishment is involved. Since contingency management principles demand that punishment or aversive conditions be eliminated as much as possible, it is understandable that the patience of the novice manager using this technique will be sorely tried, for he cannot reinforce the desired behavior or performance until it occurs. He must be content with mere increases in the frequency of or approximations to the desired behavior; often he must accept instances of non-occurrence. Such a result is quite contrary to a common belief that one particular act on a leader's part should result in the immediate and lasting occurrence of a particular behavior on the part of his subordinates.

The methods used by this officer and the problems he had to overcome demanded that, in addition to being patient, disciplined, and dedicated to behavioral techniques, he also had to be a high risk-taker. Obviously, the positive feedback of seeing his leadership techniques work was reinforcing to him. On the other hand, his failures were subject to punishment by superiors and subordinates alike. The fact that he believed a teaching position remained open to him at West Point probably offered him an unusual degree of security.

But questions remain for other officers who might wish to pursue a similar course. Is the risk too high? How much training does one need? Will my superiors accept such leadership techniques? How much time does one need to develop his subordinates before they can function under behavioral-based leadership techniques?



## CONCLUSIONS

Answers to such questions depend on many factors. Only future development and field testing will provide the requisite information for evaluation of the use of such techniques in the Army. The needed training programs, currently under development, should provide the officer with these essential behavior skills:

- Effective facilitation of group discussions on integrity, ethics, and leadership behavior.
- Effective performance counseling.
- Effective interpersonal communication (sharing of information and opinions).
- Effective use of participative management techniques (i.e., facilitation of subordinates' problem-solving and decision-making at all organizational levels).
- Effective use of contingency management techniques to motivate subordinates to higher performance and increased initiative.
- Effective development and maintenance of a climate of trust and willingness to contribute to organizational innovation.
- Effective decentralization of authority and responsibility.
- Effective specification of performance objectives and goals, especially for those subordinates desiring more direction or structure.
- Effective training of subordinate leaders in the use of the above techniques.

It should be noted that these nine behavioral skill areas are mutually interrelated. Together they provide a systematic and analytical approach to the management of behavior. At the least, they *add* skills to the officer's repertoire and provide him with increased leadership flexibility. Moreover, this case history of applying these skills in a military setting provides evidence that leadership training programs can pay off in the future, especially in attracting and retaining personnel for an all-volunteer Army.

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