

# Building an Infantry Culture of Dominance

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As leaders in the U.S. Army Infantry, we need to know how to strive beyond victory — we need to dominate. Olympic Champion Dan Gable’s wrestling career, Alexander the Great’s Battle of Gaugamela, Napoleon’s Ulm-Austerlitz Campaign, or even Wayne Gretzky’s NHL hockey performances were the products of dominance. Each leader was an extreme competitor who not only led his organization to beat its enemies but completely dominated them. These men did not strive just to participate, slip by with a close win, achieve an amorphously defined success, or be recognized by their peers. They were excellent, definite, and peerless. They sought to utterly crush their opposition.

But what is domination? It is controlled aggression to overwhelm the enemy and destroy his morale. Our Infantry band of brothers needs to embrace the idea of seeking not only to win against the enemy but also to remove its ability to reemerge. The enemy is more likely to regroup if it feels that victory is even possible. However, when the opponent’s will and resources are depleted, any notion of a rematch becomes a distant fiction.

Sound leadership through training, resourcing, and tactical decision making makes units good. However, without the psychology of domination planted within the ranks, the unit will never dominate. Worse, if leaders do not develop this psychology in their troops prior to reaching the line of departure, more of their lives might be lost in taking the objective. This mentality begins with leadership. Below are the principles for doing just that.

## **Competition**

War is a competition, and noncompetitive men will not emerge on the objective. A dominant unit develops a winning culture by consistently implementing healthy competition. After every stress shoot, physical training (PT) session, academic test, and live-fire exercise, an Infantry leader needs to reward competition publicly.



*Soldiers with the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) navigate an obstacle during the brigade’s Best Squad Competition on 9 April 2014 at Fort Campbell, Ky. (Photo by SGT Justin A. Moeller)*

There are several techniques to do this. One is rewarding performance with trophies like the Best Ranger Competition's signature Colt 1911 pistol. Contenders will continuously see this highly visible, "in your face" symbol of dominance, and it will encourage them to practice and improve. Trophies are hardly revolutionary, but leaders often forget their purpose or shortsightedly consider them a childish detail.

Another technique is to publicly post results of tests and event results in common room areas. This provides another daily reminder that competition is valued and transparent in the organization. Competition among squads, platoons, companies, and battalions promotes pride and improves unit performance. If Infantrymen don't value competition as a structure for ultimately dominating on the objective, leaders forfeit the exceptional. Lastly, leaders never decline a published challenge. They want to go, you want to go!

### **Teamwork**

To create a dominant unit, leaders must understand the essentials of establishing a team. First and foremost, they let their unit know to make everyone and every unit around it better, but then state openly that it is the best — the alpha. With this bold statement will come hardship but also trust, social bonding, and identity for building a strong team on the line. Leaders must never lie to their men and always stand up for them when in need. Leaders uphold the standard but remain loyal and always have their Soldiers' best interests at heart. Trust is the foundation.

Cohorts are surely bonded in the freezing rain and in the enemy's midst, but teams can also bond by enduring hardships in the gym, during a competition, or through everyday life obstacles. The closest bonds are often those born through hardship. If Soldiers train hard, they will fight hard together. In the end, leaders must place emphasis on having members of their unit stick together at all costs and even encourage them to mass as one when sitting together, during their off time, or even when making questionable decisions at the local karaoke bar. Finally, leaders should never forget to reward them publicly as a team. (See the previous section on competition).

Leaders can also build a team by better defining its identity. There should be no confusion about where the unit comes from or what it stands for. If the team hasn't already done so, it should begin by labeling itself something aggressive, honorable, and with heritage (i.e., the Reapers, Rangers, Devil Dogs). This draws Soldiers closer as a team, and they can unite under one moniker or maybe with a unified mantra, like "death before dishonor." Most Infantrymen have high levels of testosterone, want the bravado, and want to associate themselves with something hard.

### **Aggressiveness**

Creating a habit of controlled aggression and calculated risk should be promoted daily within our modern day Spartans. Our culture is often uneasy and apologetic with masculine aggression. However, aggressiveness is a must if the unit wants to dominate its opponent while under fire. This attribute must prevail throughout competitions, exercises, and assessments as well. If a leader attacks obstacles consistently, his men will follow suit. If the leader doesn't exude a demeanor of ruthless attack during training exercises, his men will, unfortunately, follow suit. Does this mean that the only maneuver, the only reaction, the only decision should be forever and always to attack? No. That would create a dangerous predictability and would assure some eventual violation of the principles of strategy. However, given the fight or flee response choices, a unit's choice must be to utilize aggression and work the subtleties from there. With this, leaders will assume risk and even with proper mitigation will inevitably at times press too far. However, if leaders don't accept risk, they should stay on the bench. It is also important to note that aggressiveness does not mean screaming and cussing — although there

might be a right moment even for that. Rather, it simply means diligently and decisively relaying orders, taking actions, or conducting practices with dominating intent. From the beginning of time, aggression has been a staple of winning in combat. Even the reserved, noble genius Robert E. Lee understood and promoted it on the field of battle. That is why grappling, Iron Man competitions, King of the Hill, and other physical and mental challenges are often part of a solid martial training culture. If leaders are not promoting any of the above, they should think about how to start. All great Infantry units respect aggression, and so will your enemy.

## **Fundamentals**

If the basics are not habitual practice within the ranks, the unit will eventually fail. Having an altered uniform, a cool kit, or several years in service does not necessarily equate to knowing the fundamentals. Practicing the basics is not sexy, but victory and dominance are very sexy. If leaders push their Soldiers into a system that highlights the fundamentals, they will revert to those fundamentals when they get tunnel vision or sucked into the fog of war. Leaders who dominate should focus on the basics (land navigation training, marksmanship, PT, and battle drills), and they should read professionally to maintain their martial literacy. Kenny Powers — the fictional, crude, ignorant, baseball-playing main character of cable television show *Eastbound & Down* — once said, “Fundamentals are a crutch for the talentless.” For units to dominate, they must humble themselves and understand they are not as talented as they may think.

## **Communication**

In the beginning, a leader needs to understand the goals and outcomes for the organization. Goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, reasonable, and timely are ideal. However, he should not sell his unit or himself short on the reasonable part. We are daring to be great, not striving for mediocrity. Also, having buy-in from the other members of the team while analyzing what the leader wants to be is no revolutionary concept, but it is one that is often overlooked.

A good leader genuinely seeks his Soldiers’ input and understands that his initial assessment of goals may be misplaced. If he wants to cultivate and communicate effectively to build a pipe-hitter unit, he needs to be straightforward and honest. This is a must with any unit; however, Infantrymen especially value honor and candor. The strong leader looks his men in the eyes and hands them a straight message. Beating around the bush is nowhere near alpha behavior.

It is also important to recognize that within most groups there is a formal leader and an informal leader. In a small Infantry unit, the informal leader might be a socially savvy specialist or an NCO who is able to influence his peers via humor or experience. If the leader discovers he is the formal leader but not the informal one, he must ensure the Soldiers in his unit understand the “why” of daily operations so the informal influencers can help him achieve the end state. Nothing kills a message like a negative informal influencer who undercuts the formal leader behind the scenes. Instead, the formal leader should get that person on board via effective leadership techniques and communicate with him directly.

The medium used to put out information is important as well. The leader might try using the information dissemination website “Campfire,” which allows Soldiers to quickly transmit ideas, messages, timelines, humor, and call outs. Using technology may very well make the unit’s dominant culture go viral. If not something like Campfire, leaders should consider implementing another form of dissemination. Initial posts via text, email, Facebook, Twitter, or any other form of social media can set the conditions to follow for future posts and videos, so leaders must choose carefully. Along with messaging, if the unit has an official code/creed/motto, or for that matter a rule book, vision statement, mission statement, core values, outcomes, or end states, you can show your Soldiers via rhetoric and

direct messaging that dominating is a priority in your organization. If the leader wants communication to his unit to be great consistently, he needs to have the messaging and rhetoric readily available. Remember though, face-to-face communication is still best.

### **Setting the Example**

Basic leadership principles don't lose their impact. A leader can be extremely charismatic and intelligent, but if he doesn't share radio guard or lead his men on that 16-miler, he won't lead a great unit (and probably not even a good one). Basic leadership lessons like sharing hardship, never insulting your subordinates in front of their Soldiers, and genuinely caring for Soldiers when in need will always be ingredients for making a dominant unit. If the leader is going to demand his men set the example (for instance, entering the breach when casualties are imminent), he needs to be willing to do the task himself. He should also give subordinates the credit for things that go well and accept blame when they do not (remember how Eisenhower wrote a note taking all the blame for D-Day in case it had gone badly). Most of us have heard these things so often they are almost clichés, but it is hard not to notice when our leaders act as though they have forgotten the basics or that they apply only to others. We should always see the best in our Soldiers, too, as they are often projecting the best lessons. We should let them lead by example, making tough, responsible decisions their purview. If we want our men to dominate, we need to get this one right.

There is risk in the principles listed above. Creating a dominating unit doesn't necessarily guarantee we won't run into a dominating unit in the field. That's life. However, if we do not adhere to these principles by doing everything in our power to crush our enemies, a stronger enemy may emerge as a much deadlier rematch. Every great Infantryman wants to be great via domination on the objective. As leaders in the U.S. Army Infantry, we owe it to ourselves and our Soldiers to understand how to make this happen and to act accordingly.

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