

Standardizing Excellence

SFC LEYTON M. SUMMERLIN

Standardizing excellence means repeatedly raising the bar after normalizing what is considered exceptional. Living up to this principle requires consistently making the hard-right choices over the easy-wrong ones. From working out when we don't feel like it to finishing a task under inconvenient circumstances, the more we choose the hard-right decisions, the more excellent we become. Conversely, we decrease our overall excellence when we decide to take the easy-wrong paths, such as not adhering to a standard or skipping out on training opportunities to leave work early. Whether we're improving or declining in excellence, this change often occurs subtly and incrementally and is attributed mainly to the countless micro-actions in our daily lives. Regardless of the severity of the incident, making the hard-right decisions will undoubtedly create rising tides that raise all ships.

This article will discuss why this concept is vital to our Army and then provide a framework for how leaders can assess their units and develop excellent Soldiers and teams.

Why Is Excellence Important?

A simple example of decreasing excellence in the Army is when a leader goes to an on-post establishment, such as the gym, and sees a Soldier with uniform infractions. The Soldier has an unauthorized necklace hanging from his/her shirt, one pant leg rolled up, and an out-of-regulation haircut. However insignificant these infractions may seem, when the individual is not held accountable, it sets a lower bar and creates a substandard norm. For instance, suppose these minor infractions persist because the Soldier is never corrected. This undisciplined behavior leads to carelessness and transfers into other parts of the Soldier's life, eventually affecting those around him/her or inspiring others to do more of the same. This is the Soldier who looks for shortcuts in the field and loses equipment, doesn't adhere to the standards for preventive maintenance checks and services (PMCS), making the equipment non-mission capable, or worse, doesn't care enough to have the proper safety measures in place and hurts or kills another Soldier during training or combat.



Paratroopers from the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division conduct an air assault operation during Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation 23-07 at Fort Polk, LA, on 30 April 2023. (Photo by SPC Luis Garcia)



Figure 1

The seemingly insignificant infractions are tiny sparks, but when left unchecked, they inevitably start a fire that harms the organization and everyone in it. The most common sparks are the daily disciplines in our lives that are written off as “not that important” for ease, comfort, or merely because no one is enforcing them. This example of the Soldier in the gym is just one of many we see in the Army.

These minor violations are like a tiny pebble in our shoes. The pebble leads to improper running form, and the improper form leads to knee pain. A compensating running pattern then leads to hip problems, and the hip problems become back pain which worsens until we are combat ineffective. But we chose to become combat ineffective because we chose the easy wrong and ignored the root of the problem, a seemingly insignificant pebble. After all, it wasn't that big of a deal — it was just a tiny pebble. Fast forward to when these Soldiers become leaders and develop their Soldiers to not care about these minor violations. Where does this lead? How quickly do individuals or a team decline to an ineffective state when they have multiple pebbles in their shoes? How many daily incidents like this happen across an entire post or the Army? What are the downstream results from these incidents? What are the results across generations? How does this affect our ability to standardize excellence?

What makes the Army excellent is not its equipment, tactics, or procedures — it's the quality of its Soldiers. It rings true that mediocre people, given the best tools, will produce nothing better than mediocre results. However, when excellent people are given mediocre tools, they will deliver exceptional results. This means that in order to standardize excellence across the Army, we must clearly define what makes an excellent Soldier.

The Soldier Archetype

When we look at the life of a Soldier, we see a simple outline take shape that is debatably the same for anyone, regardless of profession. We start to see a scale titled “Life,” which balances two parts: home and work. This idea is reflected simply in how we compartmentalize our day, whether by choice or requirement. In a 24-hour day, an average person spends about one-third of the day sleeping, one-third at work, and one-third at home. While sleep is a benefit that equally belongs to the other parts, it's clear that home and work are the two main parts of a Soldier's life. Many of us are familiar with a similar concept where one side is work and the other is life. We should caution against this approach not because it is entirely wrong but because it lacks specificity and lends the notion that life and work are disconnected and act in opposition, which is untrue. Life encompasses both our work and home; when these parts are out of balance, one can seriously impact the other.

To further define the work part of this outline, we can ask ourselves what 10 things make a perfect Soldier? After asking approximately 800 drill sergeants and about 200 Soldiers, officers, retirees, and Department of the

Figure 2

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Traits</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disciplined • Gritty • Fit • Trustworthy • Aggressive • Marksman • Humble • Skill Level 1 Tasks • Army Values • Hard Worker 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Quantitative</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fit • Marksman • Skill Level 1 Tasks 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Traits</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disciplined • Gritty • Fit • Trustworthy • Aggressive • Humble • Army Values • Hard Worker
<p>Character = Values + Behaviors</p>		

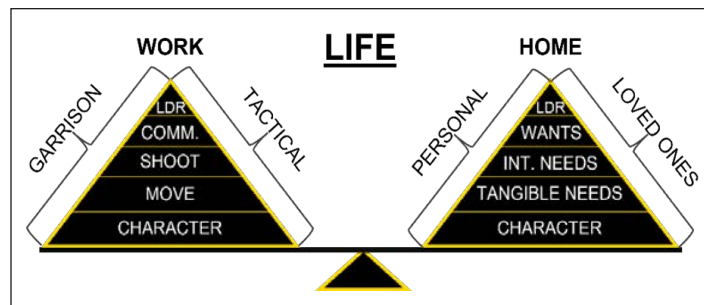


Figure 3

Army Civilians this question, we found that, regardless of rank or occupation, 81 percent of the answers given are qualitative traits such as determination or respect, and the other 19 percent are quantitative skills such as the ability to shoot or move (see Figure 2). The qualitative answers can be categorized as either a value or behavior and are the two parts that make an individual's character. In other words, character equals values plus behaviors. Because the overwhelming percent of a Soldier is character, it becomes clear that this is the foundation of a Soldier — everything else must be built upon (see Figure 3). The other components which make a Soldier are, in order by precedence:

Character — an individual's values and behaviors

Move — an individual's health and fitness level

Shoot — an individual's basic and advanced marksmanship skills

Communicate — the Skill Level 1 tasks followed by occupation-specific tasks which facilitate the collective tasks

Leadership skills — an individual's ability, acquired over time and through experience, to inspire others and make appropriate decisions that accomplish the mission or improve the organization

The last detail splits these components into two sides: garrison and tactical. These sides provide the specificity required to conduct a comprehensive assessment and build actionable plans to standardize excellence. This hierarchical framework is the Soldier archetype and illustrates a Soldier's prioritized components, facilitating the finer details that stimulate growth by preserving the Soldier's core values and behaviors.

It's important to remember that these components must be fundamentally prioritized because nothing is a priority when everything is priority number one. Improper prioritization of these parts or their components leads to many problems. When these priorities become distorted or biased, leaders may wonder why their unit, which may score well on the quantifiable metrics, has all kinds of qualitative problems ranging from low morale to Soldiers being late to formation or doing drugs while training. None of these incidents happened because the Soldier couldn't shoot, move, or communicate. They occur because of either a lapse in character or an outright character flaw. Conversely, when a leader focuses on character development and embodies behaviors such as discipline, accountability, and perseverance, every other component is undoubtedly amplified. Put simply, better people make better Soldiers, and better Soldiers are more lethal.

The Culture

Like any team, the Army consists of individuals who work together to accomplish a collective goal. But what is it that makes these groups of individuals great or not? Is it the individual skills each person has? Let's say the two greatest basketball players of all time happened to be on the same team; does this automatically mean the team will be great? Are we confident that these players would even work well together? If these individuals were to value themselves more than the group or behave selfishly versus loyally, it would quickly turn toxic and cripple the team to mediocrity at best. What makes an excellent team of individuals has far less to do with the tangible or intangible skills they possess but rather the cultivated culture between them.

What is culture and how can we simplify it to be more actionable? We know that culture is not created by an individual but rather by a group of people. We know that culture is often expressed as the feelings between members of the group, making it intangible. "I feel like everyone in our squad trusts each other" and "It seems

like everyone in that company hates it there” are a couple of examples of the language used when we talk about the culture of a particular group of people. These examples show a group, a generalization, and an expression of qualitative traits. When we frame culture this way, it becomes a clearer and more actionable equation. While an individual’s character equals their values plus behaviors, culture equals the average character of a group of people.

The social by-products of culture are a sense of belonging and psychological safety. Together they act like magnets, either strengthening the bonds between people or keeping them separated and incohesive. The sense of belonging comes from a clear understanding of one’s purpose within the group, feeling valued as a member, and how much reciprocal dependability exists between each other. Psychological safety comes from trusting each other and is built or degraded over time through interactions that generate positive or negative results. When psychological safety is present, this means that teams or individuals are more likely to hold each other accountable rather than tolerate substandard behaviors. One of the most prominent examples of an organization lacking psychological safety is when Soldiers are in a position where they should speak out on their own accord but won’t for fear of ridicule or other retribution. These important by-products can only be achieved through self-discipline, holding others accountable, and staying open to being held to account when we inevitably deviate from our own self-discipline. This sense of belonging, and feeling of psychological safety, is necessary for a team of individuals to become excellent.

Some other by-products of culture that greatly impact the connection between individuals are cultural artifacts. These artifacts embody a group’s particular values and behaviors as well as serve as a reminder that its members belong together, connecting people with the culture’s lineage. One of the most prominent cultural artifacts in the Army is the Infantry crossed-muskets insignia, which is, by itself, rooted in American history and is earned at the end of infantry training. These muskets remind every Infantry Soldier of a shared experience that ties together multiple generations of Infantry and solidifies their place amongst the Infantry Branch. Some intangible examples of cultural artifacts include mottos, maxims, colors, etc., all of which can have strong bonding effects so long as they represent the group’s shared values and behaviors. One of the most notable is the American flag and its colors. The flag itself embodies the value of freedom, and the colors each represent different behaviors important to Americans, like hardiness and valor, to name a couple. We must remember the artifact itself, and its bond-strengthening qualities will only extend to those within that culture or to those with whom it resonates. To everyone else, it simply doesn’t mean anything. The more artifacts created to appease smaller groups within the larger group to artificially bolster motivation, the more we unintentionally recreate a version of individualism, causing “they versus them” mentalities within the organization, which has a separating effect rather than a unifying one.

The last notable results stemming from a culture are the cultural elements that are woven into the fabric of daily life. These parts of life are guided by social norms that are derived from the group’s collective values and behaviors, such as written or unwritten laws, formal or informal courtesies, and customs or traditions they have. It is important to note these cultural elements, and their extensive reach, because of their significant impacts on those within that culture.

We must understand that culture is the bonding agent between the individuals on a team. Without the right culture, any organization would become nothing more than a group of individuals beholden only to what they can accomplish on their own and nothing more. When we get the culture right, it forms an excellent team that can do more than exceptional individuals.

The Comprehensive Assessment

Soldiers who want to become excellent powerlifters will have to know what powerlifting is and improve within that specific framework. Once they understand that the components of powerlifting are the squat, bench, and deadlift, they can set the audacious goal of joining the 1,000-pound club. Now they must assess their strength in each component to find where they are relative to their goals; this is their starting point.

The pursuit of standardizing excellence is the same in that we must conduct comprehensive and honest assessments of each component within the Soldier archetype to find the starting point from which we can improve. Recognizing that the Army has great assessments for many of these components makes this process more manageable. These include fitness tests, marksmanship qualifications, progressive culminating training events, and leadership assessments. However, these assessments only measure the skills that Soldiers have. How do we assess someone’s character or the team’s culture so that we know where we’re starting and build ways for improvement?



A Soldier in the 86th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Mountain), Vermont Army National Guard, participates in a stress shoot at Camp Ethan Allen Training Site in Jericho, VT, on 13 August 2022. (Photo by SSG Barbara Pendl)

Some leaders will claim that we can evaluate an individual's character from their quantifiable data points. For instance, let's say we have Soldiers who scored 540 out of 600 on their fitness test with 90 percent in all six events. Can this score accurately depict the Soldiers' discipline when it comes to making the right decisions in other parts of their lives? What about Soldiers who shoot 40 out of 40 on their first attempt at rifle qualification? Does this accurately assess that they have the mental dominance to not quit on their team during the hardships of a deployment? Or that they have the maturity to make sound decisions and not drink and drive?

One example of a simple method we can use to measure someone's values is with "The Dog Dilemma." This is a scenario-based question that goes as follows:

"You're walking along the beach with your beloved dog. The dog runs into the water and starts drowning. At the same time, you notice a stranger is also drowning. They are far enough apart that you can only try to save one at a time. There's a chance you could save both and an equal chance you may save neither. Which do you try to save first?"

We can score this question fairly and objectively with a rubric that is created beforehand by the team's leaders based on what values they rank the highest. For instance, let's say our team's leaders have decided to use a one through five scale, and the following answers are given the corresponding score, and the lowest score is the type of answer the leaders ranked the highest.

1. Without hesitation, answered the stranger.
2. With little hesitation, answered the stranger.
3. With lots of hesitation, discussion, etc., answered the stranger.
4. With little hesitation, answered the dog.
5. Without hesitation, answered the dog.

We can use simple questions such as this that test a person's values or evaluate team events with objective rubrics geared towards quantifying a specific behavior to provide us with an actionable starting point. Another simple but effective individual assessment is an inspection of weapons, equipment, or living quarters, as this will tell us their level of attention to detail, amongst other behaviors.

Similarly, setting a high standard for close-order drills is an excellent assessment of a team's collective discipline, cohesiveness, and ability to hear and react appropriately to commands. Assessments such as these allow us to work towards strengthening specific character traits and the team's culture with accuracy. Then we can reassess later and continuously improve. When we don't find ways to quantify these intangible qualities or to be objective in our grading, we often end up with a skewed and biased assessment that won't give us the accuracy required to

efficiently act on them. These methods do not have to be complex. They need to be systematic and not arbitrary, so we can take real action toward improvement. As we said before, it's essential to discuss with our teams and, without bias, break down precisely what values and behaviors are important to us and create ways to objectively quantify an individual's character and the team's culture. If we aren't measuring our culture, we're missing 81 percent of the details for our starting point toward standardizing excellence.

Development

Assessing each component gives us the details needed for improvement in each component. The more specific the assessments are, the more efficient we'll be. For example, let's say we have a Soldier who scored a 34 on rifle qualification and wants to get better. Many leaders will look at this and write it off as the Soldier just needs another repetition to try again. If the Soldier returns with the two extra points needed to qualify expert, that will be the end. But the actual increase in the Soldier's skill from one test to another would be marginal, if any.

Here's another simple way to look at this flawed method of development that leads to marginal improvement. Say we're taking a math test comprising addition, subtraction, multiplication, and long-division problems. If we can't do long division, the best score we could hope for is just above 75 percent. Now imagine we're taking that same test, but we don't know how to subtract. The number of problems we'll get wrong compound because if we can't do subtraction, we can't do long division either. Then the best we can hope for is a catastrophic failure at 50 percent. If this was the case, would we keep taking the test repeatedly, hoping for better results? No, we would identify and practice our deficiencies until we were proficient. Failing to plan for an assessment properly will always lead to poor performance. For our shooter, whose audacious goal is to be consistently shooting 40 out of 40, if we can find the actionable details of the assessment and practice these specific deficiencies, we can increase the Soldier's skills to a level where he/she is no longer averaging 34 and simply hoping it changes with a second or third try.

Development in quantifiable skills is often straightforward, whereas developing character and creating culture are complex, daily, and never ending. This qualitative development should always be considered first in our planning because our units often come up short of potential or fail altogether when we lack good character and a strong culture. We can give Soldiers the best physical training plan in the world, but it doesn't matter how great the program is if they lack the discipline or desire to do it. When a leader is actioning towards character development and creating a culture within their unit, it is rarely done in the form of significant singular events. Instead, they are developed and produced by the everyday micro-actions in their lives. The three micro-actions we must use to help develop excellent Soldiers and create an excellent culture are:

1. How we influence others;
2. The example we set; and
3. The proper application of pressure.

Influence

Influence is the ability to affect someone's values or behaviors. The two ways to influence are manipulation or inspiration, which drive the phrase "compliance versus commitment." The critical difference between the two is that when people are manipulated to do something, they are doing it because they have to, versus if they are inspired to do something, they do it because they want to.

Some common types of manipulation are authority, deceit, coercion, blackmail, and physical. While the last four are obviously wrong ways to manipulate someone, authority is not necessarily bad and is common in the workplace. For instance, when the boss says "go there and do that," most of us will execute because the boss is in a position of authority, and it is our obligation to comply so long as it is not illegal, immoral, or unethical. However, authority only works and ensures compliance while the leader is around. Once the leader's gone, if the individual or the team lacks the commitment to do the right thing on their own, who knows what will happen.

Inspiration is rooted in trust, which is built over time through repeated interactions that expose both sides to the values and behaviors that strengthen the relationship. When Soldiers see their leaders always out front, making decisions that show their value in the team over themselves, or simply in the mud alongside their subordinates demonstrating excellent character, it builds trust. It tells both parties they can, without a doubt, rely on one another. When a team knows leaders are doing right by them, they will do right by the leader. It is a common understanding

that having committed Soldiers is better than having blindly compliant Soldiers because this behavior produces a much higher-performing culture.

It's easy to see that service members who swear to defend the Constitution of the United States against all its enemies can possess some internal fire. Whether it's a massive inferno or a smaller flame, everyone has one, and the bigger it is, the better. Inspiring someone is like pouring gasoline on this fire, whereas manipulation is like an extinguisher that eventually snuffs out even the largest fires. So how can we make sure to pour gas in the right places, like individual character, and inspire a committed culture so that we don't rely only on authority?

Presence

The only way to genuinely inspire an exceptional character in someone else or create a culture of excellence is by setting an excellent example. Anything less will create a veneer that masquerades as excellence at best. Setting the example is defined as one's presence, and presence equals appearance plus demeanor plus actions plus words. Presence is the primary tool we must use as leaders to actively develop character and create a culture of excellence.

1. Appearance — visual cues that reflect our character:

- Does our appearance reflect the excellent leaders we are, or is it sloppy?
- What are we telling people with our facial expressions and body language?
- Are we physically there and engaging with those in our organization, or are we absent? Leadership is a contact sport.

2. Demeanor — the undertone of everything we do:

- Are we approachable?
- Do we have a go-getter attitude, or are we too passive?
- Are we motivated or apathetic?
- Do we enrich the team or demoralize it?

3. Actions — the decisions we make and the execution of:

- Do we constantly strive to do what's right?
- Do we work hard or expect everyone else to?
- Are we disciplined?
- Do we hold others accountable?
- Do we stay open to criticism?
- Do we keep your decisions in line with your values?
- Do we provide purpose with every task?
- Do we work hard and smart? A good leader does both.
- Do we accomplish tasks to the standard that we expect of others?
- Are we consistent?

4. Words — what we say:

- Are we clear and concise?
- Do our words inspire others, or do they extinguish them?
- Do we choose our words carefully or carelessly?
- Do we talk to talk, or is it productive?

Figure 4



The degree to which we set the example, good or bad, will be passed on to those around us at a respective rate. The higher the degree, the harder and faster the impression is left on another. Degenerative types of presence, such as toxic, tyrannical, unappeasable, hypocritical, and absent, will undermine the culture of a group and can only instill a sense of depreciation, resentment towards the leader or team, and worse, reproduce more of the same. We must actively take control of these aspects of presence rather than passively assume they will take care of themselves.

When an excellent football team is not playing to its normal high standard and goes into halftime down by 21 points, we can all agree that the coach is just as upset as the rest of the players. He may be furious or depressed and want to cuss out his players till he's blue in the face. He may even want to break things or walk out on the team because he feels they aren't working as hard as he is. But if the coach exudes these aspects of a degenerative presence, the team will stand no chance of rallying back in the second half. This coach needs to keep it together and set an inspiring presence for his players. It's about always being in control of our presence so we can be the leader our teams need, not the one we want to be in the moment.

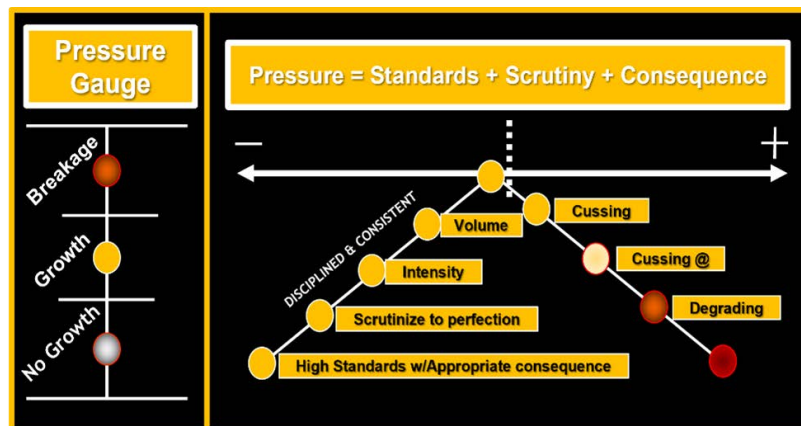
Pressure

In its original design, the golf ball was round and smooth, and every time it was hit, it would leave a dent in the ball, and when it seemed too damaged, the golfer replaced it. However, over time, golfers learned that the more a ball was used, the better it flew. This discovery led to the design of the modern-day golf ball as we know it with 363 intentionally placed dimples. Like the smooth golf ball, we become better after every challenge we overcome. However, growth comes from being put under the right amount of pressure, and just like the golf ball, too much pressure can cause us to break in one way or another. Too little pressure and there is no longer adversity to overcome. To standardize excellence means consistently applying the appropriate amount of pressure for continuous improvement.

Every challenge we undertake has a predetermined amount of pressure built into it; some are higher than others. For example, a wall-locker inspection has a naturally low-pressure level, whereas a combat deployment has a naturally high-pressure level. The pressure gauge is a visual representation of how much pressure is applied during any given challenge. This means we need to take control of all the actionable details that can adjust the pressure level as necessary to promote the growth of ourselves and those around us. So how do we create pressure, and what are these actionable details? **Pressure equals standards plus scrutiny plus consequence.**

Manipulating any of these details will undoubtedly increase or decrease the pressure. However, when the details are significantly out of balance, it will always result in some form of diminishing returns. For instance, if a leader gives a standard to be met but never appropriately scrutinizes Soldiers' work and an appropriate consequence is never administered, the pressure level is too low and will stunt growth. This lack of pressure often has cascading effects on negative behaviors such as becoming complacent or lazy. Conversely, if these same details are too high, an individual undergoing the pressure can quickly end up in the breakage zone. The adverse effects of being in this zone for too long inevitably result in other harmful behaviors such as indifference, animosity, and mistrust. We must take a properly balanced approach to produce the right amount of pressure.

Figure 5



Whether we're getting smarter, faster, or generally better, when we are in the growth zone for prolonged periods, it eventually becomes the new norm and demands that we increase the pressure for continued growth. The recommended method to gradually increase the pressure is to raise the standard, then the scrutiny, then the consequence, at the right times and with the right intensity. The recurring and progressive application of pressure is the essence of what it means to standardize excellence.

Actively Creating the Culture

To actively create culture means we are principally using the same tools to develop an individual's character, now with multiple people and emphasizing the specific traits that drive cohesion and accountability towards others. Creating culture, like developing character, is about setting an example and being an honest and transparent team player, demonstrating your value to others, and providing clear and concise tasks while providing a team-oriented purpose. This doesn't mean we must be perfect but that we must always strive to improve. Providing ourselves with these detailed blueprints for each component of our life helps bring all the members of a team on the same page. It tells us precisely what is expected of us with as little room for subjectivity as possible and provides clarity and a shared understanding.

Even with seemingly mundane tasks, we must remind our Soldiers of their importance and provide them with an inspiring purpose. For instance, Soldiers are not just sweeping because we say to and to keep them busy. We are sweeping the barracks because without a clean place to live and work, training can't be done, and if training can't be done, we can't deploy and fight. We clean to a high standard because high standards become high levels of accomplishment, which turn into self or team value, pride, and discipline. If we cannot provide a purpose for the given task, then the task is pointless and shouldn't be done. Giving tasks with no purpose creates nothing more than a culture of resentment.

We can create a specific culture at an exponential rate by focusing on the language we use. The language we use shapes the perception of the given circumstances. This perception then conditions our behaviors, which directly impacts our performance. Our performance, good or bad, then generates more of the same language, perpetuating the cycle and spreading to those around us, starting new cycles. This process can cause language to spread like wildfire through any organization. As leaders, we can use this process to promote a particular set of words or language that actively reinforces the values and behaviors of a disciplined or accountable culture and strengthen cohesiveness. The correct language, timed well, also has an amplified effect when it follows an accomplishment or a failure, and the leader not only acknowledges the performance but puts a stronger emphasis on the behaviors or values that led to it. Another example is using unifying languages, such as using "we" or "us" instead of "I" or "you" in our daily rhetoric, which subtly instills a sense of togetherness and belonging.

Another method to actively promulgate culture is to adopt a mindset similar to the law of diffusion of innovation. In short, if we focus the bulk of our energy on inspiring the few members of our organization who believe in and have adopted the cultural values we are imposing, they will begin inspiring others to adopt these characteristics.

As we continue to develop an excellent Army, the next question is how do we ensure it is a self-perpetuating culture of excellence so that we never lose it? In short, we must demonstrate and educate. We must constantly teach why character is so important, and we must present the same as this is the only way to impose character traits onto another. We cannot expect things to magically happen. When leaders idly sit by hoping things get better and mindlessly complain about how bad others are, they only perpetuate the problem rather than become the solution.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of excellence, we've set the bar high, created detailed plans on how to get there, worked hard, stayed disciplined, and held each other accountable for so long that we have finally accomplished our goal. Now it's time to relax and maintain the status quo. After all, we made it to the end, right?

Wrong. Trying to "maintain" a certain level of excellence in anything across generations during a time of comfort and abundance inevitably leads to a degraded standard. This finite mindset is the antithesis of standardizing excellence. For powerlifters, this means not stopping once they have made it into the 1,000-pound club. It means that what was once perceived as excellent by individuals is now the norm, and a new audacious goal must be set. Maybe this means getting stronger and being able to lift more weight. Or perhaps they want to maintain this

aspect while excelling in another. Maybe their new goal is to lift the same weight, do 30 consecutive pull-ups, and run a half marathon, all within a five-hour time limit. It doesn't matter how big or complex the goal is, so long as we define it and let the correct values and behaviors keep us on azimuth and moving forward.

Leaders who express to their unit that the endpoint or goal is for Soldiers to barely pass the physical fitness test and that it's okay to meet the minimum requirements are ultimately setting them up for failure. This mentality can inspire nothing more than mediocrity at best, and when we set the bar to a minimum and then fail to achieve it, the outcomes are far worse than if the bar had been set high and we had come up short. Another point of failure for us as leaders is having real expectation management skills. This means meeting teams or individuals where they're at when they come up short in their attempt to achieve a goal while seeing it for what it is truly worth. For example, leaders may encourage Soldiers to max their score on the fitness test but then degrade or downplay their efforts when they score objectively high but not perfectly. We need to recognize the hard work and continue inspiring or helping them improve rather than become yet another hindrance on Soldiers' roads to excellence.

Standardizing excellence across the Army is an audacious and vastly complex goal. But it's our job as leaders to define what this means so we can develop detailed plans with our Soldiers on how to achieve it. And if the character of the individual and the culture of the group stays at the forefront of our decisions in planning or execution, almost any goal we set will be achievable. Imagine setting goals for the Army, such as wanting all Soldiers to earn their expert skills badge. With the right people, a simple plan, and a lot of hard work, this goal is surely not impossible. If we were to pursue this level of excellence and successfully normalize these expert assessments, we would be forced to raise the standard or even make the current test a graduation requirement for initial entry training.

Standardizing excellence is not finite. By its nature, this principle is just the opposite — it's never ending. Standardizing excellence requires a culture of accountability and trust in which leaders inspire our core values and behaviors in others.

I refuse to believe that size matters. The high level of excellence, the greater culture, and what it means to be a better Soldier that we just discussed are undoubtedly achievable in an organization as large as the Army. With a little bit of self-discipline, accountability, and inspirational presence from leaders, the size of the Army becomes just another worthless argument.

Standardizing excellence is a timeless principle focused on inspiring a culture that self-generates Soldiers of excellent character on the belief that better people make better Soldiers, and better Soldiers are more lethal. This principle applies broadly to all Soldiers in the Army and reinforces the simple idea that we as leaders must embody this principle as well as educate Soldiers on it so it is never lost. May we never be better Soldiers than we are people.

Suggestions for Further Reading

My hope is that this article has been packaged in a simple, relatable, and practical manner for leaders to understand and use to improve themselves and their units. The following is a list of books that inspired this piece that I also highly recommend for further reading:

Character Focused

- Ryan Holiday, *Discipline Is Destiny*, 2022, Portfolio
- Angela Duckworth, *Grit*, 2018, Scribner
- Jon Gordon and Damon West, *The Coffee Bean: A Simple Lesson to Create Positive Change*, 2019, Wiley
- Jon Gordon, *The No Complaining Rule*, 2008, Wiley
- Jon Gordon, *The Energy Bus*, 2022, independently published
- Jon Gordon, *Training Camp*, 2009, Wiley
- Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, *The Dichotomy of Leadership*, 2018, St. Martin's Press
- Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, *Extreme Ownership*, 2017, St. Martin's Press
- Steven Pressfield, *The Warrior Ethos*, 2011

Culture Focused

- Daniel Coyle, *The Culture Code*, 2018, Bantam
- James Kerr, *Legacy*, 2013, Constable & Robinson
- Sebastian Junger, *Tribe*, 2016, Twelve
- Simon Sinek, *Start With Why*, 2011, Portfolio

- Simon Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last*, 2017, Portfolio
- Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 2019, Portfolio
- Simon Sinek, David Mead, and Peter Docker, *Find Your Why*, 2017, Portfolio
- Steven Pressfield, *Gates of Fire*, 2005, Bantam
- Jon Gordon and Mike Smith, *You Win in the Locker Room First*, 2015, Wiley
- Dave Logan, John King, and Hallee Fischer-Wright, *Tribal Leadership*, 2011, Harper Business

Development Focused

- Steve Magness, *Do Hard Things*, 2022, HarperOne
- Jim Collins, *Built to Last*, 1994, Harper Business
- Jim Collins, *Good to Great*, 2001, Harper Business
- James Clear, *Atomic Habits*, 2018, Avery
- Charles Duhigg, *Smarter Faster Better*, 2017, Random House Trade Paperbacks
- Daniel Coyle, *The Culture Playbook*, 2022, Bantam
- Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan, *The Three Laws of Performance*, 2011, Jossey-Bass
- Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, 2002, Back Bay Books

SFC Leyton M. Summerlin currently serves with the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Italy. He enlisted as an 11B Infantryman and attended One Station Unit Training at Fort Benning, GA. During his 12-year military career, he has served in a variety of duty positions to include Stryker driver, M2 machine gunner, team leader, scout team leader, assault platoon section sergeant, battalion S3 NCOIC, and drill sergeant. He is the 2021 Maneuver Center of Excellence Drill Sergeant of the Year. SFC Summerlin's military education includes graduating from the Warrior Leader Course, Advanced Leader Course, Tactical Combatatives Course, Master Fitness Trainer Course, and Drill Sergeant School.

The author would like to recognize and give special thanks to Mr. Jat Thompson and Mr. Shawn Umbrell, whose work has been inspirational. He would also like to give thanks to the drill sergeant community as well as its leaders and those who support it, and lastly, the Drill Sergeants of the Year who epitomize what it means to set the example to the highest degree. This principle was not created in a vacuum but rather by countless individuals ranging from junior enlisted and officers of all branches to Civilians and retirees who have all demonstrated their strong sense of care for the Army and a deep belief in the Together Everyone Achieves More (TEAM) mindset.

This article is intended to be the foundation for a "Standardizing Excellence" series. With this series, anyone who feels driven to contribute is invited to do so. It is designed to be continued and written by others as a collection of tools and paralleling or contrasting thoughts in support of or in opposition to this idea that the Army can only effectively pursue excellence by preserving its core values and behaviors.