

Morale and Military Performance

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Major General John A. Lejeune described morale in the United States Marine Corps as “three-fold- physical, mental or professional, and spiritual” (Foundations of Leadership). Reflecting upon Lejeune’s description prompts the question: how does morale affect performance in the United States Armed Forces?

The physical aspect of morale refers to the physical readiness. Within the various branches, the goal of physical readiness is “to develop the strength and endurance necessary to prevail in combat” (Foundations of Leadership). Each branch of the Armed Forces maintains a unique set of physical standards that must be met. For example, the Marine Corps Physical Fitness Test (PFT) consists of a three-mile run, pull-ups or pushups, and crunches. Even more specifically, the Marine Corps has a Combat Fitness Test (CFT) of Movement to Contact, Ammunition Lift, and Maneuver Under Fire to assess functional fitness in combat (Physical Fitness). The Navy Physical Readiness Test (PRT) involves curl-ups, pushups, and a cardio-respiratory component of running or swimming. (Guide 5- Physical Readiness Test). The Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) includes a two-mile run, pushups, and sit-ups (2018 Army PFT Standards). Similarly, the Air Force Physical Fitness Test (PFT) contains a one-and-a-half-mile run, push-ups, and sit-ups (Air Force PT Test Standards).

Intertwined with the physical component of morale is the mental or professional aspect. Although this is more difficult to subjectively evaluate, there are numerous instances when individuals have continued beyond the point of physical exhaustion because of maintaining the mental will to persevere. Admiral William H. McRaven, in his famous University of Texas- Austin Commencement Address now turned book, *Make your bed: Little things that can change your life- and maybe the world* (2017), recalls, “if you want to change the world, start singing when you’re up to your neck in mud.”

During “Hell Week,” the Navy SEAL class would paddle to the mudflats of San Diego and spend fifteen hours trying to survive “cold mud, the howling wind, and incessant pressure from the instructors” (McRaven, 85). The instructors provided one option: if five men quit, the entire team could go home. About seven hours in, one student began to sing. While incredibly out of tune, the student sang enthusiastically, and eventually the entire class chimed in and “somehow the mud seemed a little warmer, the wind a little tamer, and the dawn not so far away” (McRaven, 88).

Further analyzing the physical-mental readiness interaction, Colonel Vanessa M. Meyer recently published a study titled, “Sport Psychology for the Soldier Athlete: A Paradigm Shift.” Meyer explains integrating behavioral health principles into physical fitness training as “everyday soldiering language” to benefit overall readiness, resilience, and cost savings with fewer Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) failures. (Meyer, 1) Comparing soldiers to elite athletes, Meyer emphasizes incorporating sport psychology through the Army Center for Enhanced Performance to achieve optimal physical and mental performance.

Sport psychology is the enhancement of sports performance through psychological skills training. Applying cognitive behavioral interventions of mental imagery, relaxation through arousal control, specific and challenging goal setting, and positive self-monitoring is beneficial for athletic performance, and theoretically, military physical readiness.

With the goal of improving APFT scores during weekly physical training (PT) sessions, the study commenced six weeks before the unit’s semi-annual APFT. An Army occupational therapist educated unit members on four components: the use of goal setting, mental imagery, positive self-talk, and heart rate control.

Two months before the semi-annual APFT, goal-setting curriculum was introduced to the unit members. Soldiers were provided a Quick Reference Card (QRC) that included a six-week training schedule, APFT standards, and mental skills for improving APFT scores. Soldiers were instructed to identify and physically note realistic goals for the upcoming APFT on each individual QRC. Recording specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time bound (SMART) goals, the goal-setting curriculum correlates an increase in commitment and persistence, and therefore, outcome.

Employing all senses, sight, smell, sound, proprioception, and touch, to mentally replicate motor function, mental imagery is equally effective. According to neurophysiological studies, motor-performed and -imagined tasks trigger overlapping neural centers (Meyer, 12). Furthermore, visualizing form does not require physical training. By not physically training, no acute training injuries occurred during the six-week program. Each week, soldiers participated in a two-minute descriptive visualization exercise based on the three APFT events. After the exercise, soldiers participated in a one-minute slow deep breathing exercise to calm their system and conserve energy.

A motivation strategy for increased attention, confidence, and performance, elite athletes employ positive self-talk. Translating to the military training atmosphere, soldiers were advised to repeat the phrase, “light and strong,” at the end of an event (Meyer, 3). Throughout the study, establishing and maintaining a positive mind-set were emphasized.

Heart rate control improves physical and mental function in stressful situations. By introducing deep breathing exercises, as previously mentioned, soldiers are taught to control their heart rates to conserve energy, decrease anxiety, and improve focus (Meyer, 4). Stressors such as

completing the APFT can cause an unnecessary increase in heart rate and stimulate the sympathetic nervous system, or a “fight-or-flight” response.

Overall, the study proved a significant improvement of an average 13-14 points in APFT scores when compared to the units who did not receive the mental skills training. Furthermore, of the participants surveyed, 78% had not experienced previous mental skills training during physical fitness and 92% found this type of training beneficial (Meyer, 6). This paradigm shift incorporates the principles of mental fitness as a daily duty to improve performance and physical readiness.

The spiritual aspect of morale refers to “the resilience to meet the demands of [each] service and the harsh reality of combat” (Foundations of Leadership). In combat, military personnel face adversity, uncertainty, fear, and death. Outside of combat, they face personal stressors, enhanced by deployments and family separation. The spiritual reservoir that individuals draw strength from must be replenished regularly. When the reservoir empties, individuals “freeze up, withdraw, become apathetic, and feel hopeless” (Foundations of Leadership). This instance requires leaders such as officers or unit leaders to observe and identify any signs of spiritual depletion. Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman stressed this importance: “One key characteristic of a great military leader is an ability to draw from the tremendous depths of fortitude within his own well, and in doing so he is fortifying his own men by permitting them to draw from his well” (Foundations of Leadership).

Further examining the correlation between leadership and spiritual morale, Francis J. Yammarino, William D. Spangler, and Bernard M. Bass (1993) examined United States Navy (USN) Officers who graduated from the United States Naval Academy (USNA) in their study, “Transformational Leadership and Performance: A Longitudinal Investigation.” The Officers were examined and subsequently classified as one of three leadership styles: transformational, laissez-

faire, and transactional. Transformational leaders motivate the group to do more than originally anticipated or expected. Maintaining heightened levels of motivation, transformational leaders focus on three conceptual factors: charisma and inspiration, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Laissez-faire leadership takes a “do nothing” approach and resides at the extreme end of inactivity on the leadership spectrum. Transactional leaders recognize the unit’s wants and needs and clarifies how those will be satisfied when the leader’s objectives have been met (Yammarino, 85).

Yammarino research of USNA Midshipmen expected to “differentially predict subsequent transformation, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership of USN Officers and predict subsequent performance of the Officers on fleet duty. Also, transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership of USN Officers were expected to be differentially predictive of the Officers’ performance while on fleet assignment” (Yammarino, 82). Yammarino and his colleagues hypothesized “that performance as Midshipmen at the USNA would strongly predict the Officers’ transformational leadership and be somewhat less strongly but positively related to the Officers’ transactional leadership in the form of contingent promises and rewards. USNA performance was not expected to be related to Officers’ active or passive management-by-exception and was expected to be negatively predictive of Officer laissez-faire leadership” (Yammarino, 86).

USNA performance was measured by two standards: academic and military performance. Academic performance is the equivalent of a grade point average based on grades on all courses completed during four years at the USNA. Military performance is a cumulative quality point score based on performance in professional, military, and physical education courses during four years at the USNA, the Second Class Summer evaluation, annual Professional Competency Review, and semester-by-semester Conduct scores. Of the two, military performance grades are more weighted.

Leadership performance was collected and determined through Bass's Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). Senior subordinates completed the questionnaire ranking the Officers' observed behaviors on a five-point scale ranging from "not at all" (0) to "frequently, if not always" (4) (Yammarino, 89). Nine leadership scales from the MLQ were used. The four transformational leadership scales are charisma, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational leadership. The sole non-leadership scale is laissez-faire. The four transactional leadership scales are contingent promises, contingent rewards, active management-by-exception, and passive management-by exception.

Fleet performance was evaluated through two different instruments and sources. Attributed performance of satisfaction, the subordinates' satisfaction with their Officer, and effectiveness, the effectiveness of the leadership, were ranked on a five-point scale. The second source measured appraised performance as an Officer collected from the year of commissioning (1978, 1979, 1983, 1984) to 1988 by the USN while the Officers were on active duty with the fleet. This data was collected as part of its fitness reports and includes "performance in relation to contributions to the unit's mission, including effective integration of personnel and the mission and completion of assigned tasks" (Yammarino, 90). Furthermore, whether the Officers were recommended for an early promotion resulting from their performance was noted.

Analyzing the collected data, Yammarino (1993) notes "USNA academic performance of midshipmen did not significantly predict any aspect of Officer leadership." However, USNA military performance of Midshipmen predicted transformational and laissez-faire leadership and did not predict transactional leadership of the Officers. The strongest results stemmed from attributed and appraised officer fleet performance. USNA performance as Midshipmen was linked to subsequent officer leadership and fleet performance (Yammarino, 97). The USNA leadership

education and training does positively influence the subsequent performance of officers in the fleet as noted in their mission: “to develop Midshipmen morally, mentally, and physically, and to imbue them with the highest ideals of duty, honor, and loyalty in order to graduate leaders who are dedicated to a career of naval service and have potential for future development in mind and character to assume the highest responsibilities of command, citizenship, and government” (Mission of USNA).

According to Robert Owens (185), behavior of people stems from “the interaction between their motivational needs and characteristics and characteristics of the environment.” As previously discussed, a leader within the Armed Forces must be capable of identifying what motivates one’s subordinates. A leader is responsible for establishing the climate and culture of the unit or ship and constantly evaluating if and when any modifications must be made.

When he took command of the USS *Benfold*, Captain D. Michael Abrashoff was handed the helm of one of the Navy’s less successful ships. In exit interviews with those leaving the *Benfold*, Abrashoff discovered that poor retention rates were a result of not being treated with respect of dignity, being prevented from making an impact on the organization, not being listened to, not being rewarded with more responsibility, and low pay. With that knowledge in mind, Abrashoff obtained a new perspective of how to change the climate and culture of his ship.

In his book, It’s Your Ship, Abrashoff (2002) explains various management techniques from the “best damn ship in the Navy.” Specifically, Abrashoff speaks to the direct correlations of leadership and spiritual morale. One chapter titled, “Build Up Your People,” describes establishing and building self-esteem. Rather than tearing his subordinates down to make the efficient robots, Abrashoff exhibited his trust and belief in them.

As for the newest members of his boat, Abrashoff (2002) states, “Newbies are important. Treat them well” (Abrashoff, 148). After explicitly noting the lack of a welcome for newer members of the United States Navy, Abrashoff mentioned how to get new Sailors excited for their tour of duty. Designing a welcome-aboard program, all new Sailors would be met at the airport, escorted them to the ship, and Abrashoff’s cabin, and then to their quarters. Then, with their Running Mates, or mentors, the newest Sailors would be driven “all over the base, pointing out the gym, the pool, the theater, the commissary, the medical and dental facilities” (Abrashoff, 151). Abrashoff’s goal was to welcome the young men and women to San Diego and instill that buy-in and family aspect even as new Sailors.

In addition to Abrashoff’s Running Mates, there are multiple other programs to increase morale of servicemen and women. For example, Sailors and Marines who have been injured while on active duty may be treated, or challenged, by the Wounded Warrior Regiment. The goal of the Wounded Warrior Regiment is to “focus on healing each person medically with an emphasis on strengthening the Marine or Sailor’s Mind, Body, Spirit, and Family” (Mayer).

At the Wounded Warrior Battalion-East, based out of Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville, North Carolina, the motto is “Etiam in Pugna,” meaning, “still in the fight.” By remembering that these injured Marines and Sailors are accustomed to the challenge of deployments in combat zones, Motivating servicemen and women to return to duty or return to activities of daily living is key.

By acknowledging the servicemen and women and their families as a whole and not as a military robot greatly benefits the overall success of the Armed Forces. Programming such as the Marine and Family Programs for the United States Marine Corps. The Marine and Family Programs is community-based division of the Marine Corps Community Services that supports

Marines, Sailors, and their families. These services are divided into four branches: family readiness, family care, personal and professional development, and behavioral health.

Family readiness includes the opportunity to further personal and professional growth as a military spouse and support to families experiencing all phases of deployment. Family care includes child and youth programs and school liaison programs, to help provide information of making the best educational decisions. Personal and professional development involves libraries and the transition readiness program, which assists with career guidance. Behavioral health includes new parent support, sexual assault prevention and response, and substance abuse counseling center.

Incorporating these additional programs to Lejeune's original concept of "three-fold" morale aligns with the correlation that an increase in morale does positively affect performance in the United States Armed Forces. Addressing morale and its three aspects greatly benefits the servicemen and women. An increase in morale correlates with an increased retention rate, decreased burnout, and an increased job satisfaction. Personally, with the explicit evidence from Meyer's Paradigm Shift, I believe the mental skills training should be incorporated in other branches' physical readiness training. Because the mental skills training stemmed from sports psychology methods, I am excited to see how these techniques could be further applied and studied, such as in athletic morale and performance. From a sports medicine standpoint, it is difficult to objectively and solely measure morale, however, applying mental skills training and sports psychology to physical tasks results in concrete outcomes, such as increased performance and quite possibly, wins. Overall, the connection between morale and performance is undeniable.

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