The male-female Signal team

Respect and understanding make it work

by Lt. Col. Fred A. Sharp and Chap. (Capt.) Stanley R. Esterline

Upon assuming command of the 3d Signal Training Battalion at Ft. Gordon, Ga., I became involved with the open door policy. Almost immediately, I was confronted by the many problems associated with the integration of male and female soldiers in the Army.

The following incident, which occurred early in the open door sessions, is not at all unusual:

After I acknowledged a timid knock at my door, a young female soldier stepped nervously into my office. She said that she couldn't adjust to military life, that she felt harassed by the situation in the billets, and that no one understood her.

I asked for specifics.

She hesitated, then, in hushed tones, she told a familiar story: "I was walking in the company area when this man approached me. He casually made an extremely crude proposition using foul language. I was shocked; I felt humiliated and degraded. I felt there was nobody to whom I could turn. I live with a group of minorities, and I don't understand them. And the men treat the women like we can't do anything."

She was extremely distraught. And eventually she was discharged from the Army. Situations like this one — which seem insurmountable — exist to some degree in many companies. But, I asked myself, are they really insurmountable, or is there a workable solution? I knew that I disagreed emphatically with the idea that the tremendous sexual and attitudinal differences between men and women prohibit us from working together. I also knew that I tended to agree with the thesis of an essay I had read in *Psychology Today:* "Integration can only work as well as people let it work."[1] It seemed to me that a vigorous program was in order, one which would get at the causes of unrest and of discrimination.

Consequently, in November 1979, Chaplain (Capt.) Stan Esterline and I started a seminar program in the 3d Bn of the 1st Signal Training Brigade (1 STB) under the auspices of the battalion chaplain. We placed responsibility directly on those who work with the soldier, rather than on the elusive staff. We worked with twenty soldiers (50% women and 50% men). They were led by their platoon sergeants.

The seminar was designed to provide interpersonal communications between male and female soldiers as well as between the NCOs and the soldiers. The benefit is double-edged because the NCOs can keep abreast with the feelings and attitudes of young soldiers, and the young soldiers — from all over America — have the opportunity to talk, and, hopefully, to gain respect and understanding for one another. Accomplishing this while increasing human awareness among soldiers made the program goals apparent: to build respect and understanding among soldiers through group communication, to reduce sexual harassment and discrimination, and to assist NCOs in building cohesive groups of soldiers by teaching small group dynamics.

BUILDING RESPECT

Our first goal was to build respect among soldiers of all backgrounds and situations through communications. Soldiers tend to learn human values more readily, we realized, from one another than from lectures conducted by NCOs, officers, or staff. Therefore, we devised a series of questions — which are posed to the groups —to involve the soldiers in a discussion with their peers. For example: "How do you define respect for your peers?" "What does 'respect' mean, and how does it apply in the barracks?"

The soldiers responded readily to these inquiries and began talking about their successes and failures in team efforts both in the barracks and in their training. Candid insights expressing encouragement and often hostility were shared among individuals and groups. The bottom line seemed to be: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Sometimes the exchanges, though serious, had an element of humor:

One soldier to another: "Hey man, you threw ice in my face today. That didn't show much respect."

Replied the other: "I was just trying to cool you off; it was so hot."

And the answer to that was, "Well, I didn't like it."

From there, the other soldiers discussed the need to consider the rights of another before taking a drastic action like throwing ice. Open sharing of everyday concerns is amazingly helpful at building the team into a closely knit unit. "I realized that I was learning also," said one NCO moderator. I

picked up important things from the soldiers that I hadn't considered before. The program clearly builds team spirit."

A high level of self-respect is also essential to members of a group who must work in harmony. Again, we employed the question/answer technique to get at the idea of self-respect. We put a question with an obvious answer to the group:

What among the following makes you feel best when you go to bed after a given day?

(a) When you've worked hard.

(b) When you've relaxed all day.

(c) When you've 'gotten over' on your superiors.

Their automatic response was that they felt best when they had given an honest day's work. When the question was put to one group of soldiers, they responded appropriately; then several of them thought a moment, and one soldier expressed what they all were thinking. "Hey, you tricked us! We didn't mean to say that we like work." But they had said it, and their sergeant reported that they improved their work habits markedly during the next few days. They had looked at themselves and at each other and decided that a good day's work was the best way.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Our second objective, reducing sexual harassment and discrimination is obviously important to today's Army. Building upon our first objective, respect and understanding, we move to matters which relate more directly to the sexes.

The Signal Corps in particular is continually using greater numbers of women effectively at nearly every position. Still, improved understanding is needed, and in our groups we are asking simple but incisive questions. Asking a group, "How do you feel about going through basic/AIT or working with males/females?" elicits varied responses. The feeling is generally positive, with some men questioning women's physical qualifications and women disliking being treated as special cases. One soldier retorted to another who was opposed to women in his unit: "If it weren't for the women lowering the standards to get into the Army, a lot of us males wouldn't even be here." Although his conception was obviously wrong, the comment was meant as a compliment. There is, as shown, an appreciation to the female soldier that goes beyond sex.

More directed at sexual attitudes is the question, "How do you react when you see an attractive female/male soldier sitting by herself/himself?" Usually the responses in the groups are related to the range of possibilities for romantic adventure, but often a woman will say, "Doesn't it ever occur to you men that I might want to sit by myself and think?" Definitely a new thought possibility for a lot of males. Another response to the meeting of strangers was shared by a woman. "You know, what bugs me is a guy who comes up to me at a club and tries to pick me up

while I'm sitting there with my boyfriend!" The males in the group were amazed that the women didn't like being approached at every turn, but rather liked a more subtle come on when she was more obviously available.

Learning about the opposite sex in a supposedly sterile group discussion setting seems inexhaustible. SSgt. Willard Van Fossen of "E" Company, 5th Battalion, 1st STB, uses this question to stimulate discussion: "We all know that the only reason a female joins the service is to find a man for comfortable sleeping or for marriage. How many agree?" After vigorous discussions generated by such loaded questions, Van Fossen says his platoon continues on its own time building proper acceptance of each other. Men are the ones who find out the most new facts, but women are often pleasantly surprised that men are really considerate, caring people who want to learn how to treat women as something besides sex objects. A woman responded in discussion: "If I go home with a guy after drinks or dinner, I don't think it's my duty to have sex with him." A particularly hard-headed man whould have none of it. "If you went home with me," he said, "I'd throw you out of the house if you didn't cooperate, and you'd have to walk

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home." Nearly all twenty of the soldiers in the group were aghast at such a male supremacy attitude. They quickly declared support for the right of a person to control his or her own body, and it became clear in that group that women are people too. As Capt. Daniel Fisher, 6th Training Battalion, point out: "This aspect of discussion showed up consistently and expectations between males and females were enhanced on and off duty."

Women soldiers consistently express their appreciation for group sessions which allow them to share their feelings and concerns about what it means to be a woman in the Army; but the women need to hear the men tell about their feelings as well. A female soldier said after one group, "Now I know which guys I can trust and which ones I can't." Maybe she was overstating the results of a single group, but I'm sure she had taken a step toward greater understanding of the men with whom she was working.

TEAM BUILDING

Our final objective, assisting NCOs in building cohesive soldier groups, is foundational perhaps more than the other two because it deals with the people who make things happen in the Army, the NCOs. When we started a year ago, almost everyone said that male NCOs are male chauvinist pigs and that their attitudes can't be changed even by command. But we thought we'd try anyway; the results were dramatic. Repeatedly, NCOs who had said that no one can help these soldiers respect one another were changing their minds and becoming strong proponents of getting together for soldier interaction without direction from command. Lt. Creswell of "B" Company, 3d Battalion summed it up like this: "The beginning of the program caused NCOs and one officer to become very negative because it would take their time away from work they thought was more important. Eight nonparticipating NCOs (control group) were shut out from the program and at first, happy to be so, until the eight participating NCOs got fired up about the program. Suddenly, the eight nonparticipants wanted to know what was going on. Overall, 16 NCOs and one officer, all with negative attitudes initially, (about the program) changed to see positive possibilities and results with the program. The program should continue at unit level and is absolutely vital to the positive integration of females into today's Army."

Admittedly, most of our NCOs are not experienced at leading groups where junior soldiers do most of the talking. So at the outset we developed a "learning interaction guide" that allowed them to guide a soldier group which was not a gripe session or free wheeling, pointless discussion, but a verbal interaction with specific goals. Simple discussion generating questions (some of which are mentioned above) were used to break the ice and stimulate interaction. During the later stages of the group, the leader is directed to reflect on some of the things which were said to allow the soldiers to assess proper values. Several NCOs have said outright that these soldiers won't talk about these things; they have no interest in it. One NCO in particular said, "These soldiers are animals. They won't talk about anything meaningful." Only an hour later he came out, visibly impressed. "I was wrong," he said; "they will talk about it and they enjoy it."

We wanted to find out if any real change was taking place that could be scientifically documented, so we asked Victor Bell, M.D., a psychiatrist, with the Community Mental Health Activity to help us collect evidence of improvement in attitudes among NCOs. Although the final report is not in, after two months of working on the project, Dr. Bell told us that the research showed very positive trends in soldiers becoming more accepting of women with whom they are working. By subjective observation, we had been convinced;

now the numbers are also showing that, of all wonders, Army NCOs can change their personal attitudes and develop greater human awareness, especially regarding women.

We suspect, after all this, you are wondering why a chaplain is involved with team building in the Army. A legitimate question. The primary quality that a specifically trained staff member, such as a chaplain, brings to a unit is personal concern for soldiers. Thus he should have an interest unique to his unit regarding the soldiers cooperation and understanding of one another. He has a basic understanding of human worth and is trained in the art of how to communicate that worth. At the very least he has a vested interest in the unit he serves, a requirement to support and advise the commander. We are not saying it is required of a chaplain to work in the area of male/female soldier teams, but such a work is a valid ministry and can serve to aid the chaplain in his greater ministry to the unit in the Chapel itself. We perceive the chaplain to be the most highly qualified officer to direct the development of the soldier team in a battalion, but some other highly trained and motivated officer could do the job as well. There must be an individual in the unit who is emotionally concerned about soldiers to carry the load of continued maintenance and building of a soldier team.

A soldier team facilitator is the person who organizes and directs the implementation and ongoing process of group interaction learning in a given battalion. He or she works with NCOs to train them in the art of group communication and aids them in learning about themselves and other soldiers. A battalion soldier team facilitator, chaplain or otherwise, is critical in carrying out the organization and implementation of the program. But he/she must be closely identified and directed by the commander. A truism? Of course, but direct command support is imperative. The commander must care enough to say the words that need to be said to the key people involved in the implementation of the program. And no staff member, however dynamic, will carry out his task in the proper manner without close interlocking ties with his commander's concepts and goals of leadership. There is too much done, or at least tried, in spite of the commander. The commander is always where the buck stops and therefore must be the person to implement the program in action as well as on paper.

We have great respect for human relations organizations on an installation which give support to units in the areas mentioned in this article. But soldiers who are dedicated to the mission of a specific unit must be the ones to support soldier human awareness in their own units. We cannot expect resource agencies to do the job of encouraging human understanding for us. We must use appropriate resources along with our own expertise in direct application to the problem of team building and acceptance of women.

The male/female soldier team has been applied at Fort Gordon for over a year now. The soldiers here represent the entire spectrum of the Signal Corps in its Fort Gordon and TRADOC setting and thus reflect a sizable portion of the Army. We are convinced by the changes observed in NCOs and their units, as well as research evidence, that development of a male/female soldier team concept in other Army units would greatly encourage positive mission oriented relationships between male and female soldiers.

[1] *Virginia Adams, "Jane Crow in the Army," October 1981 p. 65.*

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