

Changing a Culture through Grassroots Leadership

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### **Changing a Culture through Grassroots Leadership**

During a Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention Summit earlier this year a civilian panel informed military leaders that their toughest challenge would be changing a culture. Not the military's culture but a culture brought up texting, sexting, and boundaries blurred by the anonymity of an online society.

Two years earlier during a conference held in Germany, Natasha Schuette, a female Soldier who was assaulted by her drill instructor during basic training, told her story. The theme outlined systematic failure at the lowest levels of leadership to take the problem seriously. At the same event, one expert on military sexual assault made an analogy of the prevailing culture to a popular MTV series Jersey Shore. He referred to an episode in which a male member of the show had sex with a female character while she was drunk and passed out (Millham, 2013). The difference from prevailing societal norms and military standards is the difference between entertainment and felony misconduct. The fact is, outside the military, society has some very powerful sexually explicit role models; Think Nicki Minaj and Kim Kardashian.

There are many problems facing the military as it seeks to find impactful changes to its own culture, and finding its own role models. When it comes to selecting leaders, the military must take care not to mistake competence for character. According to Secretary of the Army, John M. McHugh, unanswered phones, unreturned voicemails from those in positions of trust and incorrect numbers on victim advocate websites, lead victims to believe that the military is playing lip service when it says it wants to help (ANS, 2014). Training in mass is another check-the-block technique that doesn't seem to match the seriousness of the military's problem.

## CHANGING A CULTURE

Fortunately, solutions exist in strong grass-roots leadership. Recently, a unit utilized cadre trained in S.H.A.R.P strategies to welcome incoming Soldiers; a point where they may be at the most risk. Initiatives like these go a long way in showing Soldiers that their leaders truly do care. The use of vignettes to facilitate meaningful dialogue amongst peers is another way leaders can build trust. Conversations at this level will help leaders answer some of the harder questions that the military struggles with. Questions like: *What does a normal relationship look like and when does it cross the line?* Current culture is working to create an environment that confuses soldiers who may only have the best intentions in mind. Senior leaders who may not even know who Nicki Minaj and Kim Kardashian are may not be in the best position to come up with solutions and affect change.

Trust implies a building process, which must be developed between soldiers and those leaders who are in contact with them on a daily basis. The best candidates to build trust are junior leaders who have been part of the culture and can empathize with the challenges that today's Soldiers face. These are the role models that the military needs to empower. It begs the question: *Why does a recruiter have a government issues cell phone but a company level S.H.A.R.P rep doesn't?* The level of importance placed on a problem is often commensurate with the results. Ultimately, the right leadership placed in the right position with the right equipment will answer the phone and return messages.

Changing a culture is a huge task for the military, and it may take a decade or more to complete. Sexual assault and harassment is a serious problem that requires innovative answers from leaders at the grassroots level. A seed must be planted at the lowest level and continue to grow in order to change a culture. In the end, the military can and will beat sexual assault.

### References

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