

Raising the 'discipline net'



Photo by U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. James D. Mossman, 1st Combat Camera Squadron

By Sgt. 1st Class Timothy P. Carroll Jr.

In many ways discipline resembles a camouflage net. When a support pole is pushed up, the net rises and peaks at the point where the spreader contacts the net. In my analogy, the support poles and spreaders are the standards NCOs enforce. The stakes that hold the net from rising too far or flopping in the wind are the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), ethics and leadership. I've found it often takes years to raise a unit's "discipline net" to its highest level.

To raise the discipline, NCOs must concentrate their efforts, carefully selecting a few standards at a time and raising them to a peak. It's not possible for NCOs to enforce every standard to its peak every time. As taught in the Noncommissioned Officer Education System and found in military doctrine like FM 7-1 (the former FM 25-101), it's often better to attack a large task in little bits than try to accomplish the whole at one time.

Standards can be raised universally by selectively enforcing those critical to your unit's mission. Physical training is one of the baseline standards critical to all units and easily raised. Soldiers respond well to high-quality PT increased to a peak over time. Soldiers who are at a PT peak are better able to perform and endure tough physical and mental tasks. When you raise your PT program standards, you'll also raise unit Army Physical Fitness Test scores, thereby raising Soldier and unit morale, which in turn amplifies a leader's ability to increase overall standards and discipline.

Once a standard is raised to a peak, it usually requires some form of routine maintenance – just as camouflage nets must be maintained to serviceable conditions. This maintenance period is a good time to peak other standards. Events which will change your selection of standards are mission changes or a significant turnover of personnel. A good place to define the key standards requiring immediate attention are in your unit mission essential task list, the long-range planning calendar, quarterly training briefings and after action reviews. For example, if you know that your unit is traveling to the National Training Center in a few months to train combat operations, then you can easily identify which standards to peak.

Raising a net in too many places at one time can lead to undue stress and tear the discipline net. This can result in lower duty performance and higher incidents of disciplinary problems. Leaders who attempt to peak at too many points at one time often break the discipline of a unit rather than raise it.

The stakes hold the net in place so leaders will not attempt to push a net too high. For instance, it would be easy to raise physical ability throughout a unit by giving Soldiers steroids. However, the UCMJ doesn't allow Soldiers to use steroids; besides, ethics would prevent us from doing such things to our Soldiers which violate the UCMJ.

It's easy to see that standards are the driving force behind discipline – the net that allows a Soldier to make the hard right decision over the easy wrong decision in the absence of leadership.

I put this “discipline net” theory into action starting last October. According to the long-range training calendar, my unit was scheduled to participate in 4th Inf Division and III Corps Warfighter exercises in February and March. In preparation we scheduled field training exercises from October to January. Our primary METL task is to process and disseminate intelligence to the 4th ID. Our “killing” system is a computer called the All Source Analysis System. Sixty percent of our Soldiers and officers were new and had never before worked with the ASAS. My task was to identify a few key standards to peak prior to entering the Warfighter exercises so our Soldiers would have discipline to succeed in our unusual field environment. We worked three feet of the ground in six five-ton expandables. (Contrary to popular belief, it’s not easy to sit on your butt all day looking at a computer screen while processing thousands of intelligence reports and conduct all the tasks which come along with a field environment.)

Several of the foundation tasks I chose to be relentless on were the way we laid about one mile of cable under our five-ton expandables, set up the huge camouflage net, performed daily preventive maintenance checks and services on all vehicles and practiced trash discipline. Platoon sergeants also raised technical standards within each of their work areas.

Laying cable under vehicles must be done with safety in mind. Our rate is that all cables cross at common points laid side-by-side and follow vehicle lines. Whenever a cable was laid that didn’t follow this rule. I brought it to the attention of every Soldier. We also discovered it was easier to troubleshoot cables when they’re properly laid.

The camouflage net became a popular topic for discussion. We quickly discovered an effective way to put up a net made of

20 hexes and 10 diamonds. However, maintaining a net this big can be difficult, especially if Soldiers take short cuts. The most common short cut we encountered was staking a rolled net instead of unrolling it and staking it at the lanyard-enforced edges. I conducted twice-daily camouflage net inspections, usually calling out Soldiers to conduct major repairs. While in garrison, we held training sessions to point out the cost of short-staking the net. In addition to the cost of maintaining a poorly staked net (it collapses in a breeze), we spent hours repairing large holes that were created.

PMCS, easily overlooked unless tended to, becomes a major issue. We had three, 30-kilowatt generators and several smaller generators which ran continuously for long periods. These generators ate up a significant amount of electricity and required fuel several times each day as well as PMCS at least once each day. Although it took several fuel outs for us to devise a fueling plan, daily PMCSes uncovered several potentially terminal faults before they were major problems.

Trash discipline was my primary push. If Soldiers aren’t disciplined enough to police their own trash, especially while in the field, then the discipline net is certainly too low. We policed trash at least twice daily. If 10 cigarette butts were discovered in our area of responsibility then smoking near the operational area was off limits for 24 hours.

I pushed these standards to a peak prior to Warfighter exercises, then relaxed some of the pressure during the actual training. The result was that we had great success killing the electronic enemy. Many senior Battle Command Training Program Observer/Controllers stated we had done more to a higher standard with the ASAS and intelligence than any division had ever done before during a Warfighter. In addition, many senior NCOs and officers complimented the quality of our camouflage net, great litter discipline, amazing ability to keep continuous power and operational vehicles throughout 70 days in the field, and how well our site looked (a result of tackling the cables). I suppose a psychologist would call this behavioral modification. I like to think of it as raising foundation standards to increase the discipline net and guarantee mission success.

Editor’s note: At the time Sgt. 1st Class Timothy P. Carroll Jr. wrote this article, he was assigned to the Analysis and Control Detachment, 104th Military Intelligence Battalion, 4th Infantry Division (Mech), Fort Hood, Texas. This article originally appeared in the Fall 1996 issue of the NCO Journal.



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Just as Soldiers are taught discipline, teamwork and ethics in basic training, leaders should always strive to raise the discipline net within their units.

