

Communication

...and some ways to correct them

By SFC Ron Rosier

ANew York National Guard soldier on Annual Training (AT) at Ft. Stewart, GA, completes an L-shaped fighting position. This position has everything but a bathtub and running water. The young warrior proudly shows his platoon sergeant the position, which looks just like the one in the field manual. The platoon sergeant gives the troop "two thumbs up" for his masterpiece. About an hour later a brigadier general from the "home office" arrives on site to check training.

The platoon sergeant accompanying the general brings him to "Sparky's" fighting position. The young soldier explains the range card and fields of fire and other aspects of his fighting position. Keep in mind that Sparky is a young and impressionable type trooper (aren't they all?). The general then lectures Sparky about tactics, nuclear warfare and "real combat." This baffles the young trooper and sets his head spinning.

Then, the general ends his speech by looking the troop in the eye and saying, "This hole won't protect anybody. One big bomb and then it's all she wrote. You better have your casualty tag filled out ahead of time."

When the general leaves, a demoralized Sparky sits down with a bewildered look on his face. At 2400 hours, Sparky wakes up his battery commander and proceeds to talk the night away. It's apparent that Sparky has suffered a serious emotional upset. About 0600 hours Sparky winds up in the post hospital for observation. He spends the remaining eight days of AT in the psychiatric ward.

This anecdote is true, but the names have been changed to protect the innocent and/or the guilty. Something to keep in mind is, "It's not so much what you say, but how you say it and how it is received."

My reference materials are **FM 22-100, Military Leadership, FM 22-101, Leadership Counseling, and FM 22-102, Soldier Team Development.** (And you thought I was going to use some books by some big-name, 75-dollar-word, fancy pants city slickers. No need to re-invent the wheel when the material is on hand.)

What Is Communication?

FM 22-102, Chapter 2, page 8, says, "Communication is the process of sending and receiving information both verbally and non-verbally." Some folks would disagree and say it's the "art of sending and receiving..." Personally, I think it's both an art form and a process. The different types of communication are verbal, non-verbal (body language, gestures, etc.) and written. There's a communicator or sender, a message and a receiver. The receiver sends feedback (verbal or non-verbal) to the communicator signifying that the message



is understood. For teams on the modern battlefield, clear, uncluttered communication is especially critical (**FM 22-101, page 8**).

Active Listening

"Active Listening means listening thoughtfully and deliberately to the way a soldier says things; letting the soldier know that he/she is being heard and understood." (**22-101, page 30**) Listening and watching skills involve the communicator in concentrating on what the receiver says and does.

The communicator will be able to tell whether or not the receiver accepts what is said, understands what is important and comprehends what the communicator is trying to communicate. We decide on what method of communication will best get the message across. For the most part, it will be verbal, although it could be in a letter or a phone call.

Our communications are 75 percent verbal, so active listening is very important. "Spoken words by themselves are only part of the message, the way they are arranged and spoken has meaning." (**FM 22-101, page 29**)

FM 22-101 lists six elements of active listening:

Eye contact shows sincere interest, but excessive breaks of

Misfires . . .



contact like paper shuffling or clock watching denote a lack of interest. A relaxed and comfortable *posture* enhances the interchange of communication. Too relaxed shows a lack of interest. However, being too formal or rigid limits the feedback portion of the communication. It gives an impression that the communication is one-sided and directed. *Head nods* show attentiveness and can be construed as non-verbal feedback. *Voice* is the tone, the inflection, the pauses, the speed, the look on the face of your soldier—all parts of the total message. *Facial expressions* can change the meaning of the message into something different from its original intentions, sometimes without changing the context of the message (i.e., a domineering look, sarcastic expression or disgusted frown on the face could alter the intended meaning of the message). *Paraphrasing* or repeating what your soldier says in your own words shows understanding and attentiveness and helps determine comprehension.

The Intent

This could be worded as “the results you expect, requested or conveyed,” or “the action you wish taken.” I’d call it the reason for the communication in the first place.

“You must communicate your intent so that your soldiers are able to understand the desired outcome clearly. Keep in mind that this can only happen if you explain what you want to happen in clear, concise and complete terms.” (FM 22-100, page 46)

In an operations order, you will find the commander’s intent spelled out in clear and concise terms. Some of the questions that you ask yourself in the preparatory phase of communication would be: “What do I want this person to do and when do I want it done? Do I write it out or do I call this person? Is this a face-to-face situation? These questions can be answered in a short time or take up to hours to “hash” out. Then, you must consider your own emotional state or attitude: “Am I mad at this person?” “Do I need to shake this person’s tree?”

The military environment itself contains some built-in hindrances to communication. The communicator’s rank or position may present a stumbling block to the amount of feedback returned, causing a rift in the communication process. Chemical equipment such as the protective mask makes face-to-face communications difficult—facial expressions, tone of voice and inflection cannot be understood. Six hours in MOPP Level 4 hinders communications and forces the communicator to verify receipt of the message.

If the communicator and receiver haven’t been using a workable sleep plan, 24-hour operations can put a strain on the communication process. A careful, detailed read-back could be an alternative, but this would extend the time to send and receive important information.

A Final Thought

Communications with our soldiers should be clear and concise, with no room for any second guessing or playing “fill in the blanks.” We should be direct and “on the level” with none of this hidden agenda crud.

Of all the resources that a leader has, *time* is a precious commodity. Communications without a clear intent or an incomplete message waste time. Battles and the lives of soldiers have been lost, due to the communicator failing to make the intent clear.

I’m not talking about being “politically correct,” but treating people the same way we’d like to be treated. If we engage our brain housing group before we speak, 75 percent of the problem would be alleviated. As leaders, we foster better relationships with both our subordinates and our superiors when we focus on communicating clearly, concisely and completely. ■

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