EMPATHY AS A LEADERSHIP TRAIT

Our Army’s tragic spike in suicides has caused me to reflect on why we are having this problem and possible solutions. It also reminded me of an article a colleague and I wrote back in 2000 – “Humility as a leadership trait” (Military Review, Oct 2000). Soldiers who commit suicide are silently screaming for help. They are lonely, in great pain (be it emotionally, psychologically, physically, socially, or spiritually) and looking for a way to relieve their pain. Our Army, as a people focused profession must become more effective in seeing, feeling, and mitigating this pain. We can and should be better than this.

A solution to this problem is to add “empathy” or “emotional intelligence” into our daily lexicon. Our leaders, especially at the battalion level and below, need to understand, internalize, and practice having empathy for their Soldiers. What do these words mean? In layman’s terms they mean -

- “genuine caring"
- “feeling someone’s pain”
- “truly understanding something from the other person’s point of view”
- “perspective taking”

One of the ways I try to teach people what it means to truly understand something from another’s perspective is by presenting the topic in the opposite extreme by stating that, “I will NEVER be able to completely understand something from a female’s perspective.” Why is that? – because I am a male. Or, for example, in the movie Ghost when Patrick Swayze’s character was actually transformed into the skin of Whoppi Goldberg ‘s character. These “unreal” examples should help explain what empathy is – literally trying to put yourself in someone else’s shoes.

To truly understand something from someone else’s perspective the leader must genuinely care for the subordinate – and not just from a mission accomplishment perspective. The leader must care for the subordinate as a person. Ways to work on or improve empathy include:

1. Active listening techniques - “this is what I hear you saying” or “let me just try to explain how I think you are feeling.”

2. Encourage the person to open up to you - “If something is really bothering you, you’ve got to talk to someone about it. It doesn’t have to be me, but how about the Chaplain or someone from social services or a friend, etc.”

3. Working to let the Soldier express how they are feeling and why they are feeling that way – “What are you feeling right now? Depressed? Anxious? Lonely? Why do you think you are feeling this way? Others in the unit may be feeling the same way.”

4. If you as a leader have even the slightest inkling that one of your Soldiers is having a problem, DO NOT let “I’m fine” be an answer to “How are you doing/feeling?”
5. Actively try to monitor Soldiers’ feelings and emotions. Don’t simply view your subordinates as a means to accomplish the unit’s mission. Take the time to think about what your subordinates are feeling. Ask yourself, “when was the last time I thought about how _____ is feeling?”

Conversely, empathy does not mean agreeing with another person. Empathy is not part of winning an argument or proving you are right (and the other person is wrong). Empathy has nothing to do with “one-upsmanship” or showing you are better than someone else. It simply means understanding something from another person’s foxhole.

It goes without saying that some in our Army who label a Soldier who asks for “help” as being weak, soft, a wimp, and other worse and more derogatory names. There is no place in our Army for this label or for people who do this labeling. Obviously the necessity of our Army to produce Warriors for a very complex battlefield means we need tough, confident, and competent Soldiers. Adding empathy to that list will only improve the force.