



Building Capable Sustainment Organizations Through Trust and Empowerment

■ By Command Sgt. Maj. Michael J. Perry III



Command Sgt. Maj. Michael J. Perry III, outgoing command sergeant major for the 101st Airborne Division Sustainment Brigade, speaks about his time in the brigade during a change of responsibility ceremony at Fort Campbell, Ky., on Sept. 7, 2017. (Photo by Sgt. Neysa Canfield)

The Combined Arms Support Command's senior enlisted Soldier discusses how presence and engagement lead to empowerment.

The best organizations that I have had the honor to serve in understand one fundamental truth: cohesive teams are based upon mutual trust. This is not just a catchphrase from the Army's mission command leadership philosophy; it is a hard-won and enduring lesson that I have learned over the course of my 26-year career, from mess halls to motor pools, to forward operating bases, and to the halls of the Combined Arms Support Command headquarters.

Trust, though, is only half of the equation. Once leaders have done the hard work to build trust among their superiors, subordinates, and peers, they must take the next step to empower their subordinates to take action on their behalf. This empowerment is the ultimate display of trust, and it is never given lightly.

Trust is utterly essential to what mission command is all about, and more importantly, trust is completely necessary for sustainment formations to support, fight, and win in large-scale ground combat operations against foes who are equal to us in tactics and technology.

Gaining Trust

Regardless of your rank or professional reputation, trust will not come to you automatically. It is not issued from the central issue facility, and it is not assigned to you along with your position or duty title. It has to be earned, and re-earned, every time you join a new team.

For noncommissioned officers (NCOs), the mission-essential task of gaining the trust and confidence of both their leaders and Soldiers is one they must absolutely master. All NCOs, myself very much included, will not be in our current duty positions forever. We will move on to new organizations and have to establish ourselves among new populations. How can this be done?

The simple answer is by getting off your fourth point of contact and getting out there among your Soldiers, civilians, and contractors. NCOs are

expected to be "leaders of presence." This is not just presence, as in having personal charisma and the ability to engage with an audience. Leaders must be present, both physically and intellectually, alongside their teammates.

As a leader, you become present by getting out of the office and meeting folks, seeing where they work, and understanding what they do. Getting out and into your organization is critically important for establishing the bonds of trust and cohesion. You need to do this even if you are going back to the same organization or the same type of organization you served in previously. People change, mission and structures change, and one cannot assume that the way things were is still the way things are now.

By being present continually throughout your tenure in a unit, you are able to take an accurate pulse of your organization, identify friction points, and help build cohesion and trust across the command. The larger your span of influence, the more challenging it will be to make time to conduct these engagements across the command. My recommendation is to prioritize this effort by blocking off time on your demanding calendars. Only then can you conduct these critical engagements.

Maintaining Trust

Demonstrating commitment to and understanding of your organization through an active presence and positive engagements will build the bonds of trust between you and those within your organization. But trust gained can easily be lost if you are stagnant and lose touch with what is going on across the command.

You must continuously build the team through engagement. Engagement happens at all echelons, and the most effective NCOs act as a fulcrum between those of us who serve and those whom we serve.

Presence and engagement alone are not enough. NCOs should show up to all the meetings and walks around the motor pool, but they should nev-



Sgt. 1st Class Eric Pena, Spc. Crystal McNab, and 1st Lt. Leeann Sagucio, all of the 962nd Quartermaster Company (Mortuary Affairs), Special Troops Battalion, 3rd Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade, answer questions on Army retention during a leadership development event at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, on April 24, 2018. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Ben K. Navratil)

er contribute anything that does not add value. Effective NCOs are leaders who have gotten to know their organizations and can leverage their own technical and tactical competence to be part of the solution.

NCOs, especially those serving in staff or headquarters billets, must complement their officers. They do not have the same duties or responsibilities, but with bonds of trust established, they can provide mutual support in the execution of their tasks.

Once commanders and NCOs have relationships built on the foundation

of cohesion based upon mutual trust, commanders can empower NCOs to take decisive action on their behalf. And that is what mission command is all about. Everything I have described is about setting the conditions in the organization so that empowerment happens.

If we understand the people, structure, and mission, then we can accurately assess the environment and advise our commanders on the way ahead. If NCOs demonstrate their commitment to the organization through presence and engagement, then commanders will empower them to take action.

Empowering NCOs does more than just change and improve the culture of a particular place or unit. If commanders are comfortable empowering their NCOs in training and at home station, they will be ready to do so during critical mission-essential tasks and in the heat of battle. That trust and empowerment can literally be the difference between defeat and victory.

Command Sgt. Maj. Michael J. Perry III is the command sergeant major of the Combined Arms Support Command at Fort Lee, Virginia.