

Leadership Behaviors for Positive Cultures

Transcript: U.S. Army Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness Outreach Webinar

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Presenter:

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| Lyteria Walker: | 00:04 | Welcome to the Directorate of Prevention, Resilience, and Readiness Outreach Webinar for March: Leadership Behaviors for Positive Cultures with Major General Retired Tammy Smith. Please note that the views of DPRR Outreach Webinar presenters are their very own and are not endorsed by the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense. This month our guest is Major General Retired Tammy Smith. Major General Smith retired in 2021 as United States Army General. In her final military assignments, she was responsible for Army quality of life in military family policy within the ASA for merging the SHARP and Army Resiliency Directorates into a single entity within Army G-1 and for establishing the Army Talent Management Task Force on behalf of CSA McConville. Her final operational assignment was as the Deputy Commanding General - Sustainment, Eighth United States Army, US Forces Korea. In retirement, she volunteers with local veterans and holds advisory board positions with two major corporations. |
| Lyteria Walker: | 00:04 | Major General Smith. Thank you so much, ma'am for joining us this morning. Please take it away. |
| Major General T....: | 00:08 | Yeah, my pleasure. It's good to be here and I'm just going to say as a retiree, I miss you all. So it's wonderful to be able to reminisce and do this webinar and to reminisce about a few things that happened to me while serving and also share some lessons of leadership that I learned from other people and that I continued to improve upon as I made my way through the system in a sense. You've got my background, so you know that I finished up there at the Pentagon. I was reminded recently by Ms. Belcher that it was a unique role that I held during the time that I was there. This was a time when General Siemens was the Army G-1, and we had a great working relationship from some previous jobs. |

- Major General T...: [00:58](#) And when I got assigned to the Army G-1 and then later to the MNRA, what I ended up doing was calling it "the cleanup person." I was the one that got those projects and those jobs that just popped up and you needed senior leader oversight of them, but you didn't get a whole lot of direction, and you didn't get a whole lot of help in some ways. And I was able to work my way through those in a way that continued to have a positive command culture. And I'm going to say that no matter what project I was given, no matter what job I was given in the military, it was important to me that I had a positive culture so that people could do their best work. I thought that doing your best work was how you could help people thrive.
- Major General T...: [01:58](#) So they tossed some things at me. They asked me to re-stand up the talent management task force at the time. General McConville was coming in and had some very specific views on what he wanted that task force to do. I took that on and the standing up of that task force. We also had a merger at the time of the Resiliency Division and SHARP, and I know we've continued that evolution, but this was a directive by the Secretary of the Army that said, "I think that there are things that are duplicative and those two programs, and I think that it's really about values and behaviors and can we merge those two organizations and get some efficiencies, but also improve how we're providing policy for the Army." I was also given a job where the Department of Defense at the OSD level decided that they would give the Warrior Games to a service.
- Major General T...: [02:57](#) And I got the tag on that one also to move the Warrior Games from Department of Defense, still making them a joint event, but move that to being executed by the Army and also becoming a private/public partnership. And we had a great relationship that we developed through TRADOC and Disney who took that on. So as you can see these were varied type of things, but through it all, I was able to maintain this positive culture. And so that's why I picked what we're talking about today. It's leadership behaviors for positive cultures. How do you consistently do that? And how do you set conditions for people to thrive in the workplace and actually want to get up and come to work in the morning? I think that that's an important part of it.
- Major General T...: [03:57](#) So I'm going to tell you a little bit about how I did it and about how I was able to scale this and replicate it. Whether I was a Lieutenant Colonel, whether I was a two-star General, whether it was me and one teammate wandering around the Pentagon with a notebook trying to figure out what the CSA wanted with the talent management task force. In any of these

environments, I found that if I use these behaviors and tools consistently, I would consistently build the type of atmosphere around me that made people just want to thrive in their workplace. At least that's how I remember it. So here's a few of those things. I'm not a slide person, so I'm not going to throw up some slides on here. But what I want you to put in front of you, if you're taking some notes, is just go ahead and draw a triangle and write the word "trust" in the middle.

Major General T...: [05:02](#)

Because really if we're talking about leader behaviors that lead to a positive culture, at the end of the day, what we're really striving for is an organization that has trust in everything that you do. Meaning that you trust your boss, that your boss trusts you, that you trust what your coworkers say, you trust what they will say they will do. It's going to get done. And at the end of the day, it's trust that is the important takeaway of what it means to have positive behavior in the workplace. But trust is an outcome. It's not exactly a behavior. And so there's some things that we have to do before we get to that feeling of trust that marks a healthy workplace. And so that triangle that you drew with trust in the middle has three sides. Even without a PowerPoint slide, we've at least got a model on here. And so one of the things that was important to me to build this type of culture is on one side of that triangle, I put transparency.

Major General T...: [06:22](#)

You can't build trust in an organization unless your leaders are willing to work in an atmosphere of transparency, meaning that you all, as members of the team, understand why you're doing the work that you're doing, and you have an understanding of how the other pieces of other organizations fit into this. So transparency is one of the key parts of that triangle about behaviors that lead to this culture of trust. You have to have transparency in your workplace. You can't be sitting around and just waiting for the next task. You are all too skilled and much too senior for that. We have to create an atmosphere of transparency so that you understand the bigger picture and you can do things on your own. The other thing that I would put on the side of that triangle is authenticity.

Major General T...: [07:34](#)

You know that you can spot a fake in the workplace, and so as a leader, you have got to get comfortable enough with yourself in order to be authentic to the folks that you're trying to be transparent with. There are a lot of ways that you can do that, but one of the ways is recognizing what type of leader you are and how to best use your leadership skills in the environment that you've been placed in. Even though we're talking about trust and culture and transparency and authenticity, we know that it's a little bit different whether you're in a straight line

green tab, chain of command type of situation, or whether you are working in the Pentagon where you're amongst peers who have a great depth of experience in everything that they do and are all fairly senior.

Major General T...: [08:37](#)

Those behaviors work in either of those environments, and it does make a difference. In the transparency piece when we go back and think about how to set the conditions for that transparency, this is a behavior so that you can consistently do that. When I came into an organization, whether it was setting up the Warrior Games or whether it was the SHARP division or Quality of Life or Eighth Army, I let my teams know how I made decisions so that they could be better prepared to come in and brief me. This is how I make decisions. I am an iterative decision maker.

Major General T...: [09:40](#)

So I'm not decisive in the sense that when you come in, you're going to walk out of the room with a decision. I do it more in an iterative way. When you come in and you give me more information, I understand the bigger picture. I can give you better guidance on what I want to do next, and I don't always make a decision. So knowing this in transparency, you know not to be frustrated if you didn't get a decision coming back out of my office because that's how my mind works. I'm going to do things a little bit iterative. And as my experience grew across the board, what I learned about decision making, especially in some of the ambiguous environments that we work on in the Pentagon and some other places, is that it's really easy to make a decision. It's not so easy to make a good decision.

Major General T...: [10:35](#)

And so just knowing how I make decisions is part of that transparency and one of those behaviors that leads to this positive culture. I share with the team all the things that I know. I mean, there are things I don't really hold back. There are certain senior leader conversations, of course, that we can't be completely transparent about. But for the most part, I made it a point that what my team knew was all the things that I knew. Because what I wanted to make sure at all times is that we kept the train on the tracks. And that moving forward in these iterative ways, making progress, didn't rely on my physical presence in every decision and in every conversation that took place. And you always want to be completely transparent in the budget space, of course. There can't be hidden agendas in the background.

Major General T...: [11:35](#)

Everything that we do across the big Army has to do with our resources and our budgets and how we're aligning to look three and four years down the road. You have to be completely

transparent with that. So some more on that authenticity piece of that triangle: it's the comfort in the workplace that comes from your ability to be authentic, just to be able to be yourself, to be able to walk around. And I did this a lot: I'd walk around with a coffee cup and just chat with people and find out what was on their mind. The phrase for that is "manage it by walking around." We've heard that phrase before, but I tell you there's a lot of value in it as a senior leader and as a two star, and this was hard because the culture fights you on it, but I wanted to be accessible, and I wanted you to not be afraid to talk to me.

Major General T...: [12:32](#)

A lot of times I did that by walking around and starting a conversation with you. Part of this authenticity, if you're really going to be authentic, is that you have to make yourself available to your folks. So you have to get out of your office, and you have to make the time to do those walkabouts and see what people are working on. And you'll probably find some surprises out there, but it is absolutely so important. And part of this authenticity too, people know I always think of General Bigham always used this phrase about that your video has to match your audio. Those things that you're talking about, your behaviors have to match those. And that is a big part of the authentic behavior that helps build trust in the center of that triangle. You have to care a little bit about the folks and what they're going through.

Major General T...: [13:31](#)

I mean, especially in times of change. And all of these things I've talked about, whether it's the Warrior Games or the leadership task force, or the merging of SHARP or the quality-of-life things. All of these things happen in a period of turbulence and transition and new leaders coming in and changing directions on what they say their priorities are. So all of this stuff, this authenticity and this transparency is part of it is to bring a little bit of clarity when leaders change. And there's a lot of ambiguity in there. So now I go back to that triangle because we still have one more side, and this is one that I use that I don't think that you are going to see in an Army doctrine book or anything like that. So the third piece of my triangle of how you build an organization that has trust and what are some of the leadership behaviors that contribute to that consistently is that you have to be willing to give your people top cover.

Major General T...: [14:41](#)

You have to be willing to take a punch in the throat for your team. You have to be willing to do that because they're out there. If you set these conditions where they want to do the work and you've empowered them to do the work, and you've been transparent with them, and you want them to be authentic, you want them making decisions, you have to accept

that every once in a while it's not going to go exactly as you had hoped. And you must never throw your team under the bus. Never. You take the throat punch, and you move on, and you give them top cover so that they can do their work. And when your team sees that you are willing to do that, it doesn't make them sloppy, it makes them defend you because they don't want you to get punched in the throat.

Major General T...: [15:30](#)

They know you'll take one, but they don't want that to happen. So it contributes to the culture, it contributes to initiative, it contributes to all the things that you want in a transformational work environment if you are willing to give a little bit of top cover to your team. A big part of this has to do with clear communications. Through this transparency, through this authenticity, through my willingness to give you a little bit of top cover, we're having really honest, real-time, and iterative conversations about what our priorities are, about where we're going, about how our budget aligns with that. And all of those things are working to move us in a direction. One of the things that moves a workplace that has a lot of trust, and the way that I would convey trust in an environment like this is that I trusted my folks enough that I didn't have to be there.

Major General T...: [16:44](#)

I had enough self-confidence in that I was giving the right type of guidance, and I had enough confidence that you all knew exactly what you were doing. You know much more about your jobs than I did. And so I didn't always have to be there. So one of the behaviors that conveyed that I trusted you and that we had an organization that had a foundation of trust is that I could take leave, and I could approve your leave. You could go to Orlando with your kids and the world would not fall apart because we were being transparent and open and iterative with each other, and you were able to do those things. Also, let other people talk. So, I mean, it's really in time constraints. And when we get to be senior and we do have a clear vision of what it is that we want to see, it's easy to just take over all the time.

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But you know what? I'm not the one doing the work. You guys are the ones doing the work. So I have to be confident enough to shut my mouth and to let you all talk and to give your guidance to me about the best way to take these approaches and to make these iterative changes. And you have to stick to the timeline too. And the expectation that this is part of the transparency and how I convey this trust across the enterprise, is that I trust you, that you're going to make the timelines, you're going to make the time hacks, that the budget request is going to be ready, that even if they move it to the left from another organization, that we're going to stick to our timelines

and we're going to be consistent about them. And that helps you also have trust that you've got the time and the resources to do your work.

Major General T...: [18:42](#)

Part of this is that I applaud independent action, and I want you to come up with new ideas. I don't have the best ideas; I just have a framework for bringing together people to talk to and to have this transparency and authenticity. And I'll give you a little top cover to give you that room, but I don't have the best ideas, so I need to encourage independent action. If you're in one of those high-level meetings and you're representing the organization, I've empowered you to make the same decisions that I would make. I'll accept responsibility for you. I told you I'm going to take a punch in the throat for you, but I don't want you to hesitate. You have to have enough confidence that you understand what we're doing, and you trust that I'm going to give you that top cover, so you make a good decision in that meeting.

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And I know that happens. I've seen that happen countless times. When you let your folks go, you're going to move things along more quickly and in a straighter line because everybody understands. And that's one of the things. So when we go back to that center of that triangle about trust, it's that organizations move at the speed of trust. When you're in an organization that starts and stops when everybody says, "I don't know what's going on. I don't know. Were you in that meeting? I didn't hear what was going on," it slows things down. When an organization really is engaging in these behaviors that lead to that core trust, you're going to move along quickly and you're going to do the things that are necessary in order to get the job done. And like I say, organizations move at the speed of trust.

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And if you want to know an organization that's got a lot of trust, just look at one that's hitting its milestones and moving along and making up new things and doing these iterative things. And that's how you know that that trust actually exists. So let's go a little bit more about these behaviors. So you've got my triangle with transparency and authenticity. We're adding a new one, and the leadership book says it's called top cover, and all of that leads to trust. But what's really important and what everybody in the workplace absolutely has to work on is their communication skills. None of this will work without good communication skills. And I know that we in the military have a concept that we call military bearing. And out in the world it's often called executive presence.

Major General T...: [21:40](#)

But this must be present in the leader and in the people who are leading things that you have this military bearing or this executive presence, and that you consciously work continually on your ability to communicate to your folks, to your peers, to your boss in a way that shows we're moving things forward. We know what our job is; we know what the timeline is; we know what we have to do. Continually working on your communication skills is really important to this. I know that when I came into the Army I didn't know a lot about being in the Army as lieutenants do. But one of the things that I brought with me is that I did a lot of public speaking in high school. And so I had been taught how to communicate formally, how to get an idea across, how to respond in an extemporaneous manner, how to use humor a little bit in my communication skills.

Major General T...: [22:51](#)

What I found is that as I moved up that pyramid that was Army leadership, the more that I could work on and improve my communication skills, the more often I found myself having success in whatever work environment I was in. That's one of the behaviors that I need to put back on you. If you were looking to create an atmosphere that builds this trust, you really have to think about your communication skills, not only in how you are speaking or talking or conveying but also in just some interpersonal aspects and how you interact with people in a way that encourages them to bring out their best work. And that comes from the communication skills because at the end of the day, we know what our jobs are, we know the basics of them, we know what we're supposed to do every day, but where it goes sideways is that so often, and especially at the higher level of the organization in senior staffs, is that there's a lot of complexity and there's a lot of uncertainty.

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Complexity being that we've got so much information that we're almost overwhelmed by our information choices and uncertainty, meaning there's certain things that we don't know and so we don't know how to respond to them because we're just uncertain about those environments. And that complexity and that uncertainty creates an atmosphere of ambiguity that we don't always know what to expect. So now I've been trying to tell you that we create certainty with transparency and authenticity in a little bit of top cover. But the truth is that at most of the levels, senior levels that we're working at, you're going to deal daily with ambiguity and uncertainty. And the best advice that I could give you, and this goes into communication skills and how you talk about these things, is that I have come to believe that it is less important for me to figure out every single answer to bring complete certainty to the uncertainty.

Major General T...:	25:29	<p>It's more important for me to help you be comfortable in some things that are simply ambiguous that you just don't know the answer to yet. I know that our Army culture is that we've have to know every answer. We have to know everything. Go to the third page, read the footnote on the last slide, add up the columns in the meeting. We have to have certainty. But in an environment that is built on trust, one of the things that I can do as a leader is help you be a little bit more comfortable with the ambiguity and the uncertainty that is resident in the organizations that you're working in. And it is especially ambiguous a lot of times when we have leadership changes. And again, when you change those directions and you have someone come in and say, "We're going to do this with the Warrior Games, and we're going to do this with the talent management task force." That's where you have that.</p>
Major General T...:	26:27	<p>But again, you're never going to take out all the uncertainty or all the ambiguity, and you're going to kill yourself trying to get to that. And so one of the best things that I can do as a mentor and a coach is to help you be a little bit more comfortable with that uncertainty as you move around. These things all come together to the behaviors. And if you can do these things consistently, if they just become part of what I call "your equipment," then you will be able to transport yourself to any organization and have a result of trust if you consistently engage in these types of behaviors. Now, I know it isn't always easy because I'm talking about the bluebird of happiness here as if everything is always positive in all our work environments.</p>
Major General T...:	27:34	<p>And if we're being realistic, that's not true. Unfortunately, we've got some coworkers who have bad days. We've got leaders who are toxic. We have those things, and I'd be remiss if I said that everybody has good leadership skills. They don't. But the thing is, I believe that our own self-examination of how we communicate and how we do these things is that everybody has the potential to be the person who can create a positive culture around them. It might be in your cubicle area, it might be in your whole directorate, it might be in your whole division. But I believe that everybody has that and that you can work around some of these folks who are a little less positive and maybe bring a little bit of toxicity into the organization.</p>
Major General T...:	28:30	<p>There will always be these little pockets of excellence in these little pockets of achievement as we I use these particular skills and we bring these behaviors to a workplace. We're going to close with just a little bit more on communication and then circle back around on that. So this executive presence that I talked about and this communication, when we look at it from a</p>

literature thing, it's the military bearing. It's how you act. It's gravitas. We think of it that way. It's how you speak. Do people have confidence that you know what you're talking about? It's also how you look. And I know we sometimes think about that as appearance, but do you have that military bearing? Do you have that command presence in order for people to say, "They're squared away, I trust them"?

Major General T...: [29:28](#)

And a lot of times you use some of these skills that are executive presence and the command presence or military bearing, and you're using that because you're covering up a little bit of that ambiguity of the things you're not certain about. But again, these behaviors if you can use them consistently as you go through the different levels of the organization as you continue to rise, I think that you will find that they are applicable in all workplaces, and that if you apply it consistently, you will get a consistent increase of trust in your organization that helps your organization move a little bit faster and continue to do great things for the Army along the iterative path that your leaders want you to achieve. So I appreciate your time today. I would love to interact with you. Look me up on LinkedIn, and I wish you the best of luck. Thank you for continuing to do great things for our Soldiers and for our Families.

Lytaria Walker: [30:38](#)

I appreciate you, Major General Smith. I would like to extend a very gracious thank you to you for taking the time today to provide this great presentation for us. This was wonderful. Please visit DPRR'S website armyresilience.army.mil for the latest news and information from the Director of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness. Listeners, thank you for joining us today and have a wonderful rest of your day.