

Leader Presence and Its Impact on Organizational Climate

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Abstract

The Army is developing strategies and programs to build team cohesion and maintain positive organizational climates. Committed leaders are shoulder-to-shoulder with those they lead as they encounter obstacles. This article highlights the importance of leader presence in the Army profession in two parts. First, the authors explain what leader presence is and why it matters. Then, the authors examine 10 factors that affect organizational climate and how leader presence is integral to each of those factors. A leader's presence influences perceptions and engagement in a unit and is a crucial contribution to organizational climate.

A leader's presence is an essential aspect of leadership that touches daily activities as well as the perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and performances of team members within the unit. This article discusses how a leader's presence is a critical element of leader effectiveness and an integral component of maintaining a positive organizational climate. This article cites doctrine, academic studies, and historical references to discuss leader presence from the individual leader perspective in part one and expands to how leader presence impacts an organization's climate in part two. Consider this historical example, which occurred on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo, to begin the discussion on leader presence. The British commander, the Duke of Wellington, stated about his French opponent, Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, that "[his] presence on the battlefield 'was worth forty thousand men'" (Wellington Collection, n.d., para. 4). In this quote, Wellington acknowledges a link between Napoleon's presence derived from the emperor's leadership ability and how Napoleon's presence influences the climate of the entire French army. The impact on the climate was significant because once the French soldiers knew Napoleon was on the battlefield, their commitment to accomplish any assigned mission increased.

Descriptions of leadership and presence vary in academic literature. While research indicates leadership is both visible and physical (Ford et al., 2017), there are aspects of presence that are intangible. Authors and cofounders of The Ariel Group, Halpern and Lubar, provide an example. Using their description, leadership presence is “the ability to connect authentically with the thoughts and feelings of others, in order to motivate and inspire them toward a desired outcome” (Lubar & Halpern, 2003, p. 3). According to U.S. Army doctrine, presence consists of bearing, fitness, confidence, and resilience (U.S. Department of the Army [DA], 2019a). As leaders acquire experience and develop over time, they will increasingly demonstrate these four attributes. The point is not perfection but improvement as the attributes work together producing synergy. Therefore, while the physical attributes of a leader’s presence become more visible to others over time, the intangible qualities are also under development. The following provides an overview of leader presence and briefly explains each presence attribute.

Leader Presence

Bearing

Bearing consists of courtesy, appearance, demeanor, and consistent professional behavior (DA, 2019a). While bearing includes one’s attire and presentation, it is more than appearance, such as looking good or looking the part (Ford et al., 2017). Bearing is also founded on displaying courtesy and exhibiting professionally correct behavior. Arguably, the harder parts of bearing include establishing credibility, clarifying expectations while facing ambiguity, and maintaining composure in stressful situations. See Figure 1 for more details on bearing from the Center for the Army Profession and Leadership.

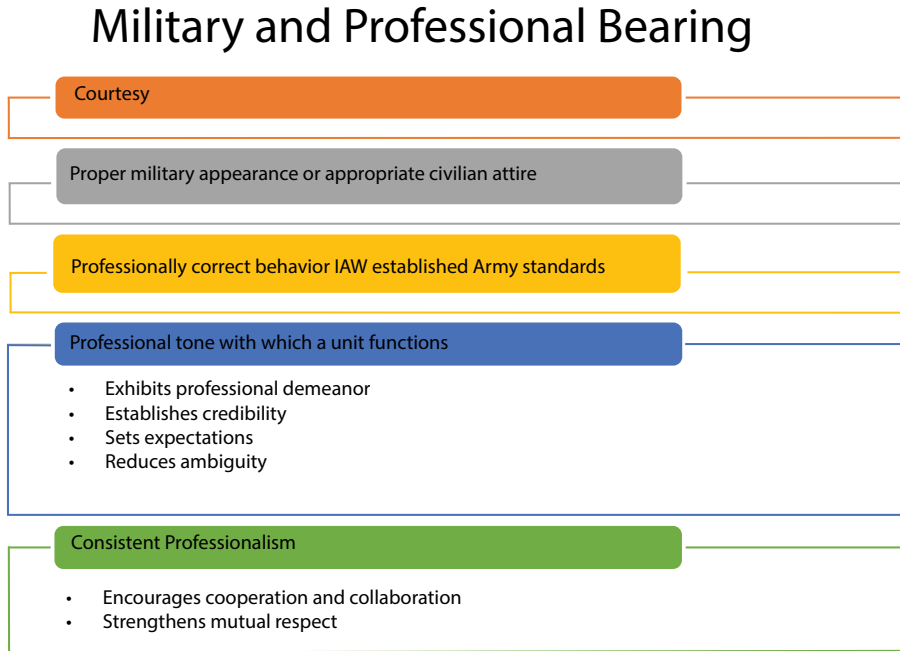
Fitness

For fitness, the U.S. Army employs a holistic health approach that encompasses a person’s body, mind, nutrition, spirituality, and recharge abilities, as shown in Figure 2, the circle of health (DA, 2020b, p. 13-2).

The circle of health emphasizes the interaction of the individual with the community, prevention of disease, and treatment of illness and injury. Regarding fitness, leaders consider the whole person because the sum truly is greater than the individual parts. Leaders who emphasize the holistic health approach set a positive example by demonstrating the importance of the health factors. One example is the Civilian Fitness Wellness Program (CFWP); the CFWP promotes exercise, education, prevention, and overall quality of life (DA, 2015a). It is paramount for leaders to stay



Figure 1
Elements of Military/Professional Bearing



Adapted from *Army Leadership and the Profession* (Army Doctrine Publication 6-22), 2019, by U.S. Department of the Army.

healthy and fit to ensure they can make correct decisions to guide the entire organization. Finally, leaders exhibit consideration for others by encouraging fitness in their subordinates and upholding public health measures. A workforce with optimal health enables a greater level of readiness.

Confidence

Confidence is twofold; confidence is the leaders' belief in themselves and the team's belief in their leaders. First, "confidence grows from professional competence and a realistic appraisal of one's abilities" (DA, 2019a, p. 32). Leaders must be self-aware and honest with themselves and those they lead. Second, for the unit to be successful, the team must believe in their leader. One of a leader's highest praises is knowing that subordinates have confidence in their leader and are willing to follow that person through hardship if needed. An example of this happened in the



Figure 2
Circle of Health



Adapted from *Holistic Health and Fitness* (Field Manual 7-22), 2020, by U.S. Department of the Army; *What Is Whole Health?*, 2022, by U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/>).

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Vietnam War in 1963 when Capt. Colin Powell exhibited confidence in front of his subordinate, Lt. Alton J. Sheek, while both served in combat as advisors to the South Vietnamese Army. Sheek commented on this experience with confidence in Powell and his ability to lead: “Colin had an air about him ... he was very much in control of things and knowledgeable” (DeYoung, 2006, p. 61).

Resilience

The final attribute is resilience; it refers to the “ability to persevere, adapt, and grow in dynamic or stressful environments” (Army Resilience Directorate, n.d., “About” section). Resilience encapsulates how individuals recover and overcome adversity such as loss, disappointment, setbacks, or injuries (DA, 2019a). Intense emotional experiences like losing a soldier or a civilian team member can take a toll on a U.S. Army leader and lead to lingering emotions of anger, frustration, depression, or anxiety. Resilience is the process of overcoming these impediments, and it starts with the leader’s mindset. Acknowledging a setback requires the self-awareness to understand how an obstacle affects the individual and the people around them. Life experiences, introspection, and learning are crucial building blocks in becoming a better leader and developing presence. Therefore, “developing presence will require you to go places and do things that feel uncomfortable, at least initially” (Halpern & Lubar, 2003, p. 3). The following discusses how the four presence attributes affect organizational climate.

10 Factors of Organizational Climate

Understanding the nuances of leader presence at the individual level can improve unit climate. Showing up and being seen are not enough (DA, 2019a); effective leaders demonstrate commitment to the organization through their presence. Further-

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more, how leaders present themselves to an organization can convey competence or ignorance. “Organizational climate refers to the perception and attitudes of Soldiers and Army Civilians as they interact ... with their peers, subordinates, and leaders ... The most significant influence on an organization’s climate is the quality of its leadership” (DA, 2017, p. 2). Equally important, the Army has identified ten factors that affect organizational climates (Center for the Army Profession and Leadership [CAPL], 2020a). This section explores each factor in more detail and briefly explains the symbiotic relationship between leader presence and unit climate.

Leadership

The first factor and the tip of the metaphorical spear is leadership. “An Army leader is anyone who ... inspires and influences people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation” (DA, 2019a, p. 113). Leaders serve as role models, take prudent risks, and prioritize workloads—all of which build a positive climate. A leader must confront harmful behaviors and take appropriate action to remove work barriers, which can have a negative impact on the unit climate. Additionally, a leader’s attribute of bearing is visible in leader actions such as exemplifying the Army Values, enforcing standards, and providing guidance.

Communication

The second factor is communication, which includes verbal, nonverbal, active listening, and cultural awareness skills (DA, 2015b, 2019a). Communication enables effective leader presence; leader presence “influences the interpersonal behavior of interaction partners” (Madrid et al., 2016, p. 10). To communicate authentically, a leader builds trust by creating a feedback loop comprised of sharing information and incorporating feedback from others. These actions further develop the confidence of subordinates and maintain a positive climate by encouraging honest and candid communication. In addition to feedback, leaders must tailor their message to a spe-

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cific audience and consider both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. For example, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright used different pins on her suit lapels to communicate to people with whom she was negotiating. Her lapel pins were usually humorous, but that humor set the tone of the negotiation from which she could address U.S. national interests (Kirschner, 2022).

Respect

Every leader should start with introspection. “Ask yourself if you command respect because people *have to* respect you or, rather, because you’ve truly earned respect” (Whitehurst, 2015, para. 1). Conveying confidence and commanding respect as a leader depends on the professional bearing that leader portrays. Similarly, leaders set the example and treat all people with dignity and respect. The entire organization benefits from an atmosphere of dignity and respect; this professional behavior underpins all relationships. Lastly, a leader’s words and actions must be consistent; otherwise, subordinates may lose respect for them and question legitimate orders or intent.

Cohesion

Cohesion is indispensable for establishing resilience and shaping a unit’s climate. Leaders strive to foster an environment that values cooperation and exhibits esprit de corps. Conversely, if leaders are unsynchronized with their team, their disorganization can become a debilitating weakness and may hold the team back (Geiger, 2016). With cohesion, employees share best practices and lessons learned; they shun information hoarding. Leaders also use multiple forms of communication to create cohesion, reach audiences at multiple levels, and establish a shared understanding. Second, leaders inspire and motivate people into action through engagement. These actions may include creating meaningful group work that accomplishes the mission and achieves a higher purpose. Third, leaders promote inclusiveness—ensuring existing team members feel included and making newcomers feel welcome. All employees want to feel like valued team members who can exercise a level of autonomy in accomplishing the organization’s mission.

Growth/Development

The fifth factor that influences climate in organizations is growth. Leaders should be self-aware, pursue development opportunities, and not conceal their self-improvement. Everyone has room for improvement, and everyone makes mistakes. Completing training events and learning from mistakes build confidence, resilience, and fitness. Moreover, a leader perpetuates a learning environment by encouraging professional and personal growth, as well as applying preventative measures for



harmful behaviors. Some aspects of a learning environment include challenging how the organization operates, discarding outdated procedures, and seeking new approaches to problems (DA, 2015b). As all employees may not be receptive to development, a leader must take the time to coach or mentor. A leader also pursues additional resources to train and develop subordinates so they can be more confident, resilient, and fit in mission accomplishment.

Adaptability

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said, “Change is the only constant in life” (King, 2019). A leader learns to surmount the fear of change and the unknown through adaptability. Adaptability will inevitably reflect one’s presence, especially resilience and confidence, as the individual develops the skills and knowledge to adjust to new conditions. Displaying a willingness to compromise allows flexibility in achieving goals and improves organizational climate. For adaptability to become second nature, leaders should show agility through daily activities, allowing subordinates to observe and emulate. Other means include reinforcing versatility, encouraging creative ideas, and questioning assumptions. With practice, adaptability will enable leaders to move beyond baseline expectations and establish lasting credibility.

Empowerment

Some indicators of empowerment for a positive climate include providing broadening experiences, creating ownership of tasks, and building trust and confidence (CAPL, 2020b). Leaders should utilize an empowering presence. The process starts with self confidence, which gives the leader the ability to empower and inspire others. Leaders should allow their subordinates to practice decision-making and invite them to advise on important decisions. As leaders enable a learning environment, an empowering presence can transform situations and influence success. Furthermore, leaders expect their subordinates to demonstrate initiative and competence. “Empowered unit members are authorized to operate as they see fit within the limits of the commander’s intent and resources available” (CAPL, 2020b, p. 10). This means leaders should delegate authority as needed and give subordinates the latitude to accomplish tasks and complete the mission (DA, 2019b), without the person in charge if necessary.

Recognition

As a leader’s presence evolves, his or her sense of recognition and awareness becomes stronger and more attuned. Awareness should not be egocentric; leaders



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should be humble about their personal accomplishments. Their awareness should be for the recognition of subordinates who are developing into future leaders. One example is a subordinate receiving an award for exceeding a standard. This type of recognition can contribute immensely to a junior leader's attribute of confidence and future performance. Leaders, therefore, must become adept at noticing others' contributions. Identifying a subordinate's contributions to mission accomplishment can positively affect organizational climate. When the leader recognizes the employees and values their choices, employees will have a greater level of commitment. These actions directly impact how subordinates perceive the leader and the presence they exude.

Discipline

Discipline reinforces leadership and climate. Military discipline consists of respect for authority, regulatory standards, training readiness, proper conduct, and obedience (DA, 2020a). Subordinates expect their leaders to enforce standards without deviation or partiality, demonstrate zero tolerance for unethical behaviors, and place the good of the organization above one's own needs. "Soldiers, leader and led alike, work together to accomplish the mission rather than feed their self-interest" (DA, 2020a, p. 2). Maintaining good order and discipline results in universal accountability and the prompt responsiveness to eradicate counterproductive leadership. Leaders with presence must be confident in their abilities and have the courage to do what is right. Leaders with bearing will set those expectations and enforce standards consistently across the formation.

Fairness

A leader with presence exudes a measure of fairness that is free from discrimination and is willing to stand for diversity and inclusion. This leader remains objective by prioritizing requirements and applying policy consistently to all members. An individual's performance and abilities should determine work assignments, opportunities for professional development, promotions, and awards (CAPL, 2020a). Moreover, favoritism has no place in a positive climate. Favoritism erodes morale, contributes to conflict, and correlates to higher employee turnover. Likewise, the perception of favoritism can erode the confidence of junior leaders. Leaders must have the bearing and confidence to do the right thing and address challenging situations like discrimination or favoritism when they occur. Additionally, a lack of transparency may contribute to a perception of unfairness, regardless of any unethical or illegal acts. Leaders must ensure their actions are above reproach and seek advice or counsel as needed. Ultimately, fairness creates better team alignment and sustains healthy unit climate.



Summary

The attributes of leader presence touch all daily activities, from the mundane to the extreme, and are an integral part of the ten organizational climate factors. Hence, an effective leader's presence helps to prevent counterproductive leadership and promote readiness throughout the unit. Frances Frei, a professor for the Harvard Business School, once said, "Leadership is about making others better as a result of your presence and making sure that impact lasts in your absence" (Sandberg, 2015, "Third, Nothing Is Someone Else's Problem" section, para. 6). Leaders use their presence to make the unit climate better and generate forward progress to overcome current and future challenges. Notably, effective Army leaders strive to improve the organization every day and accomplish the mission. These leaders embrace the Army Values and are better equipped to build and maintain positive climates.

Presence is about setting expectations without stifling initiative. Leaders understand their presence influences what subordinates do when the leader is present, as well as when they are not. Involvement includes leading from the front, awareness of soldiers' lives in the barracks, and everything in between. Presence does not mean leaders have to touch everything; obviously, that is impossible and unreasonable. However, when leaders fail to demonstrate presence, order is not maintained, and organizational climates suffer.

Similarly, leaders must share experiences with those they lead. What leaders do and what they condone lets their people know what is important. Sharing stressors such as anxiety and pain builds team cohesion, and subordinates will be more committed to follow the leader. Finally, leaders cannot distance themselves from their subordinates and expect their subordinates to respect and trust them. Leaders must understand their people and take care of them—that is the deeper part of presence. ❧

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