



Further evidence that the Army is shrinking is found in a [recent Army Times article](#), which announced that 20% of screened captains would be told it's time to hang up the uniform. For those left behind, it could produce the devastating side effect of competition between leaders to not get cut or to be the best. An unhealthy culture of competition is the last thing we need right now.

If you walk into any combat unit in the United States Army, you'll find a competitive thermostat with the setting stuck on high. Those who wear the uniform love to compete—no matter the event or the task. This point became very clear to me a few years ago when two Soldiers burst into my office demanding that I participate in an impromptu taste test. They asked that I sample both of their chicken wings so I could declare the winner of the best hot wing recipe. Like I said, everything is a competition. As leaders, we need to be careful that we do not develop a culture of competition within our units, but one focused on personal and professional growth.

Competition isn't a bad thing, but we should recognize that it has the ability to blind individuals and organizations, holding them back from taking the necessary steps to improve performance. When we compete, we don't just worry about our own performance; we spread our focus out among those we compete against. For example, a competitive

officer might [hold their cards close](#), instead of sharing best practices. I discovered the negative effects of competition during a recent gunnery qualification exercise. Throughout the gunnery tables, I found myself being pulled towards competition, wanting MY crew to be the best. I watched others succumb to the same mindset; individuals cut corners or made mistakes because they were worried about the score. Competition outweighed training. For me personally, it took a conscious effort to maintain focus on the fundamental tasks at hand, and not worry about how everyone else was doing.

While the Army continues to shrink, leaders need to ensure that the culture of their organizations don't promote a "Top Gun" mentality- the need to be the best, even at the expense of others. One such way to turn down the thermostat of competition is to bring focus back on the "Why" we serve, "Why" we train, and "Why" our nation needs us.

Instilling the "Why"

A squadron commander once taught me that if we want to take the focus away from competition and align it towards everyone improving their individual or organizational performance, we have to make sure everyone understands the "Why" behind what we do.

In Simon Sinek's book, [Start With Why](#), he tells the story of Ben Comen, a young man with cerebral palsy who competes in a race against healthy runners. After all the runners finish the race, they return to run alongside Ben for the remainder of the course. He is the only competitor who is helped up by the other runners when he falls. He is also the only runner who completes the race with everyone cheering for him. Sinek points out that when we compete against everyone else, no one wants to help us. In that particular race, Ben knew his "why", he wasn't competing against anyone else. He was running to challenge and better himself.

Think about the impacts of that idea on our training and our organizational culture. If gunnery crews weren't competing against each other for "Top Gun", and everyone focused on improving their individual skills or the skills of their unit. If platoon leaders weren't worried about getting the best OER, but worried about making the Company better.

Time and Place for Competition

While I wrote this to argue about the downside to competition, I also think there is a place for it within our organizations. Physical competitions, squad competitions, etc., [help promote unit pride](#) as well as provide an azimuth check for leaders on the training they've already conducted.

This Requires Leadership

The night before we began shooting our final qualification out at gunnery, the commander sat down with all the leaders and brought everyone back to the "Why". We weren't out there for scores, we were out there to improve our ability to fight. We weren't out there to compete against each other, we were out there to get the most out of the training opportunity. With that critical conversation, the "Why" began to permeate throughout the organization. His words adjusted the thermostat.

As the Army continues to shrink, leaders will need to monitor the competitive thermostat of their organizations. When we see subordinates start losing the "Why", it is up to us to help remind to them. In doing so, we will help those around us to refocus on improving themselves, the organization, and be ready when we are called upon to fight and win our Nation's wars.

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