



By: Orlandon Howard

Have you done any preventative maintenance on your unit lately? A crisis may be looming.

Corporations deal with issues and crises all the time. They typically have a lot at stake if they spiral out of control, namely, money. The value of a company can be reduced drastically by a headline or a hashtag. So, they can be easily convinced of the merit of investing in preparedness and proactively monitoring and addressing issues before they turn into a crisis.

In the military, the incentives are different. There's no stock price or fiscal bottom line to worry about (at least not as an immediate consequence). The drivers are more abstract and ideal. Arguably, military unit leaders have more meaningful and substantial incentives, namely, the moral, legal, and social responsibility to take care of the people who serve, and the organizations they serve in. Therefore, they must be just as mindful, adept, and agile at anticipating where issues arise, sensing them as they emerge and dealing with them before they boil over into a crisis.

What's a crisis at the unit level? Serious internal drama that generates external help - unit inquiries, investigations, and office calls. Who doesn't love those? It may be caused by a random incident, but more likely stems from a cluster of issues or a much larger deficiency. It's another thing that will take your attention away from training and all the other important stuff you'd rather be doing.

Crises and issues are often preventable, nothing regular inspection and preventative maintenance can't catch and help square away. So, here's a basic guide to help troubleshoot your organization for issues to help prevent them from metastasizing and taking over your unit.

**If safety ain't first, it's last.** Safety incidents are your single greatest risk for a crisis. Like traffic accidents, excessive operational speed is the main cause of most unit accidents. They typically involve people rushing to get things done, overlooking safety precautions and being careless. Cliché alert - 'don't rush to failure'. Be patient with the operation and your team. Build in enough time in your schedule to allow appropriately paced performance of actions.

**Deal with bad behavior a little publicly.** If you have someone saying or doing things that are inappropriate like demeaning troops, using disrespectful or abusive language, or being

insubordinate, don't overlook it. They need to know it's not okay and so does everybody else watching. It's a good practice to praise in public and reprimand in private. However, find a way to make others aware you didn't let it pass. Even if it's, "I need to see you after this." That's a subtle indicator you disapprove and care enough to act.

**Look out for hazing or bullying.** It's happening. The question is how much and how bad. Address it in your next required training briefs such as Equal Opportunity or initiate your own brief and speak to the kind of culture and command climate you want to foster - one characterized by maximum mutual respect. Let everybody know hazing of any kind is prohibited and punishable. Then speak to similar activities, and denounce all versions of harassment, spontaneous or planned. Remind them of organizational values like honor and respect and help them realize the inconsistency of such behaviors with these values.

**Pay attention to your troops' jokes.** Ha Ha, it's funny because it might be true. Troops sometimes make sly jokes about incidents that you might want to be aware. Figure out what kernel of truth lies behind the joke. Keep an ear out for the subject and direction of it. Discreetly ask the person laughing the hardest, what was meant by the joke. Then let their bosses know you are concerned and motivate them to share your concern.

**Be careful what you laugh at.** LOL can lead to EBL, 'endorsement by laughing'. Control your chuckle. Making superiors laugh is an accomplishment for some troops, which means they'll retell the story where they said something crazy and you laughed at it. Now, as far as anyone can tell, you approve not only of the comment, but the action or circumstance they mentioned. If the comment is inappropriate, at minimum, make sure your facial expressions immediately communicate it. That's also another great way of expressing disapproval without a lecture.

**Deal with toxic leader behaviors.** If your subordinate leaders treat others in a way that make you wince, it's probably not okay. Tell them before their subordinates tell someone

other and higher than you. Use [Maj. Gen. Schofield's famous definition of discipline](#) to dispel often held myths about 'old school' leadership. In 1879 he said, "The discipline which makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment. On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an army." Treating others how you'd want to be treated is a real old school ethic that stills produces the best results.

**Study your command climate surveys.** Read those things like an intelligence analyst. Do some casual [media-style sentiment and tone analysis](#) on the comments. Is the feedback positive, neutral or negative? What's the crux and intent of the feedback. Figure out to what or to whom multiple negative comments point. If they point you or areas you're directly responsible, fix yourself. If they point to others, let the counseling begin, but start informally. Also, prevent intimidation or retaliation by subordinate leaders. Remind them of whistleblower regulations.

**Take informal complaints seriously.** Especially in matters involving equal opportunity or sexual harassment. You can prevent a crisis by arbitrating these issues between the parties proactively. Get the facts ASAP. Bring everybody in to tell their side of the story. Then make an assessment whether escalation is warranted. Warranted or not, conduct a retrain of any areas violated. Make sure definitions and policies are understood, e.g., this constitutes sexual harassment, this is what cultural bias or insensitivity look like, etc.

**Welcome the dreaded unit inspections.** Invite them even. The blocks you have to check to satisfy those programs' directives help prevent problems. If you're in command, and you do it within your first 90 days, you typically get a pass on the results if you have a plan and commitment to get your stuff up to par. Use the inspectors to identify potential issues and vulnerabilities in your programs and your unit. Let them to be the bad cop. Ask for a re-inspection in areas that were substandard.

**Make crisis prevention everyone's job.** It's not just your job. Make sure everyone knows they are also responsible for the morale, welfare and culture of the unit. Hold them accountable to make every contribution within their power to foster a healthy command climate that limits the conditions lead to issues and crises. On the other hand, this puts the onus back on you to empower and support them in doing do so, and to set a great example for them to follow.

Clearly, there is only so much a leader can do to prevent issues and crises. Despite your best efforts, some will arise that you can't prevent. Somebody will do something stupid without warning, some slickster's shenanigans will culminate on your watch, or someone on your team may just make a serious, but honest mistake. However, you can survive the scrutiny and have a clear conscience if you did what you could to at least mitigate the risks and lower the probability or severity of the incident and crisis. Whether you do it for principle or you do it for self or unit-preserving pragmatic reasons, do yourself and your unit a favor, be vigilant, and brave enough to confront problems, and you'll save the dramas for Netflix.

*Orlondon is an Army Public Affairs Officer currently working as a fellow with Fleishman Hillard public relations agency in New York. He was previously the PAO for 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division (Fort Riley, Kansas) for their rotational deployment to Europe, 2017-18. He's a former commander, Field Artillery Officer, NCO and Soldier.*

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)

- [Pinterest](#)