



By Douglas M. Willig

*“Trust is one thing that changes everything. It’s not a nice-to-have; it’s a must-have. Without it, every part of your organization can fall, literally, into disrepair. With trust, all things are possible - most importantly: continuous improvement and sustainable, measurable, tangible results in the marketplace.”*

*-Steven M. R. Covey and Doug R. Conant*

The foundation of the United States Army is our People - Soldiers, Families, and Civilians. Our foundational approach to a culture of winning at the point of contact depends on ensuring our People are trained and ready to fight and win our Nation’s wars, defending the Constitution and the American way of life. To accomplish this, we must provide purpose, direction, and motivation towards the ends of ensuring everyone in our Army Team feels like a valued member of their Team. Moreover, we must establish and build trust within our teams. In his book, [The Thin Book of Trust: An Essential Primer for Building Trust at Work](#), Charles Feltman defines trust as “choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person’s actions.”

I believe the Army's strategy of *People First* will result in generating and increasing trust. The success, and conversely, the failure of this strategy depends on our ability to get to trust through establishing common purpose, authentic engagement, and interpersonal relationships. If you're a leader at any echelon within "This Is My Squad" seeking to lead better through a culture of trust, then this is for you.

### **Start with Why - Our Common Purpose**

The first step to cultivating this powerful culture of People First is to understand - Why do we serve?

Speaking at the Association of the United States Army's Dwight [Eisenhower Luncheon](#) in 2017, General Mark Milley said this:

*Here in America we will have a government of the people, by the people and for the people. It says that all of the people, regardless if you are male or female. It doesn't matter if you are gay or straight or anything in between. It doesn't matter if you are black or white or Asian or Indian or any other ethnic group. It doesn't matter what the country of your origin is or the spelling of your last name. It does not matter if you are Catholic or Protestant, Muslim or Jew, and it doesn't matter if you believe at all. It does not matter if you are rich or poor, common or famous. In this country, in these United States, under these colors of red, white and blue, all Americans are created free and equal. We will rise or fall based on our merit, and we will be judged by the content of our character and not the color of our skin. That is the core organizing principle of the United States of America, and that is why we fight.*

Therefore, each of us is an equally valuable member of this winning team and worthy of respect and belonging. We serve because we believe this American ideology - that each of us has intrinsic, equal value. That is worth defending, even with our last drop of blood. To lead from this common purpose is the foundation for establishing a climate of trust. Do you live the Golden Rule? Do you embody empathy? Do you believe "that all *People* are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness?"

### **Define the Enemy - Ego, Emotional Armor, Fear, and the Assumption of Ill Intent**

The second step to winning is to confront what erodes, undermines, or destroys trust among us. Maya Angelou once [said](#), "I don't trust people who don't love themselves and tell me, 'I

love you.’”

Through the military lens with which we view what it takes to win in combat, we also seek to identify and defeat the enemies of trust and connectedness. Our egos and our emotional armor against the fear of shame are the enemies that work against us. In his book [Ego is the Enemy](#), Ryan Holliday writes that, “Pride blunts the very instrument we need to own in order to succeed: our mind. Our ability to learn, to adapt, to be flexible, to build relationships, all of this is dulled by pride.” He then argues, “When we remove ego, we’re left with what is real. What replaces ego is humility, yes – but rock-hard humility and confidence.” Dr. Brené Brown writes in her book [Dare to Lead](#) that, “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection.” She continues, however, “Shame resilience is the ability to practice authenticity when we experience shame, to move through the experience without sacrificing our values, and to come out on the other side of the shame experience with more courage, compassion, and connection than we had going into it. Ultimately, shame resilience is about moving from shame to empathy – the real antidote to shame. If we share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can’t survive.”

Calm, self-aware leaders have an outsized effect of clarity and direction over ego-driven, Teflon-coated, hard-chargers tripping over their blind spots. What is your emotional armor? What is your story of struggle and overcoming that connects you with the People you serve? What are you afraid of? What shame are you carrying? What blind spots is your ego keeping in the way of authentic connections?

### **Authentic Engagements - Get to Trust**

Major General Mark Landes challenged the 1st Army’s Division East command teams in his initial guidance to “Get to trust” with our People.. How? The foundations of trust among our People flow through engaged leadership via sets and reps of life-on-life connections. It’s formed through our presence- during counseling, physical fitness sessions, mentorship talks, calls and emails, leader development sessions, picking up trash or brass together at the range, sharing a meal, and even having bad days together. All of these shared moments of our lives, whether work- or home-related, build towards deepened and sustained relationships resulting in empathy, authenticity – and finally, trust. “We don’t trust people who don’t struggle, who don’t have bad days or hard times. We also don’t develop connection with people we don’t find relatable.” Dr. Brené Brown continues, “Trust is stacking and layering of small moments and reciprocal vulnerability over time. Trust and vulnerability grow together, and to betray one is to destroy both.”

So, can we operationalize this in the Army today? Is there a formula for wider application? How do we generate and assess trust? The answers, I believe, are absolutely yes. The power resides in each of us. Major General John M. Schofield is often famously [quoted](#) from 1879, “The one mode or the other in dealing with subordinates springs from a corresponding spirit in the breast of the commander.” This is about how people treat people. Treating others according to the Golden Rule, “do unto others as you would have done to you,” generates respect and over time, demonstrates authenticity, and eventually builds trust. The recently implemented Forces Command Foundation Days, locally applied as “Spearhead Day,” accomplishes exactly that. The frequency of team-building physical fitness competitions and candid discussions in coffee shops and other creative out-of-the-office environments are already paying dividends, building trust among our teammates and encouraging Soldiers to seek help instead of “Soldiering on.” How are you pursuing trust-building in your Foundation Day discussions? What feedback are you receiving from your team leaders? Do you feel a corresponding spirit when connecting with our People in these engagements?

### **Interpersonal Relationships - That Get to Trust**

Major General Scott Jackson, the former commander of 1st Security Forces Assistance Brigade, addressed our maneuver battalion pre-command course at Fort Benning with something I hadn't heard before. Paraphrased from my green notebook are his words, “As a leader, focus on what only you can do.” Perhaps to those who have heard that over the years of professional development, it sounds painfully common sense, even a platitude. But for me, it powerfully distilled all the ideas, initiatives, and quotes I was gathering in my notebook in preparation for a command position into a crystallized understanding of what was not only important, but most impactful. According to [Simon Sinek](#), trust emerges when we consistently answer our People's enduring need to know, “Do you care? Can you help? Can I trust you?”

Here are some starting points to check against your approach to relationships: What can only you do to establish and build interpersonal relationships towards a foundation of trust unique to your respective position or echelon?

- Be present and engaged: physically and cognitively - do you have and seek a corresponding spirit in your seniors, peers, and subordinates?
- Set the climate of trust: do you embody empathy? Do you live the Golden Rule?
- Model discipline and standards: are your actions aligned with your values? Do your deeds match your words?
- Model self-awareness/be real: are you “Humble in your aspirations, Gracious in your successes, Resilient in your failures?” (Holliday) How do you share those as part of

your story?

- Embody partnership: how do you treat, work with, and talk about your aligned/assigned units, peer units, internal units/staffs?
- Counsel at echelon (Rater, Senior Rater, Supervisor, Team Leader): do you lead an engaged conversation to understand each other within the professional relationship, resulting in a mutually-developed growth plan, allowing for follow-up and measurable progress? This also facilitates periodic, informal, and personal check-ins and a pathway for the potential for increased levels of responsibility and mentorship.
- Encourage creativity and initiative: Melinda Gates shared an epiphany she experienced as she came into her own as a leader in the Gates Foundation, "...curiosity and asking questions are a leadership superpower." Are you professionally curious? Do you have the courage to take initiative when you see it or embrace it when a subordinate presents it?

## **The Win - Get to Trust**

Winning at the point of contact among our People depends on our ability to get to trust through authentic connections among our Soldiers, Families, and Civilians. If you believe what I believe, the American ideology - that these truths are self-evident, "that all *People* are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," then you already have the cornerstone for building trust in your team.

I encourage you to reflect on both where you and your team are now. I challenge you to have the courage to recalibrate. Check your ego. Lay aside the emotional armor that keeps you safe but distant. Assume positive intent when asked or tasked with helping a teammate or a partner unit. Be fully present in every engagement. Have the courage to ask for help. Be willing to extend trust and be trustworthy. Embrace the impact of our common purpose. Seek to know our People and invest in them. Put People first, and you will get to trust.

*Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Willig is an Infantry Officer currently commanding the 1st Battalion of the 305th Infantry Regiment at Camp Shelby, Mississippi as part of 1st Army's Division East. His passion for connected leadership began in Army JROTC in high school, has been refined through experience - especially multiple combat tours and foreign exchange positions, and continues in his current assignment partnering with our National Guard and Reserve component maneuver battalions.*



## Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)