



By Andrew J. Bibb

The first time I took the Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) I felt as if a massive burden had been lifted off my shoulders. My Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) scores were steadily declining as I aged. I was frustrated because I knew I was fit to fight. To stay that way, my fitness routine focused much more on overall strength and endurance than push-ups, sit-ups, and 2-mile runs. This meant I had no issues with field problems and ruck marches, but my APFT scores suffered.

I didn't know what to make of the ACFT until I took it for the first time. To my happy surprise, almost all of the ACFT events measured the things my training regimen emphasized. The kettlebell is my training implement of choice, and kettlebell training transfers very nicely to most ACFT events. When the grader told me my score after that first

test, I was elated. After years of trending downward my score was suddenly respectable again.

[It remains to be seen what the future holds for the ACFT](#), but I pray it's here to stay. Not only because it is objectively more relevant to modern warfare than the APFT, but also because I'm much better at it. This may seem petty, but it actually reflects a primal urge to prove oneself valuable. There is a deep-seated desire wired into all of us to be good at the things that matter to others, especially in a professional context.

This fact reflects a self-evident truth that, if applied, can mean the difference between being a mediocre leader and a great one. Professional fulfillment is found at the intersection of what one is good at and what the organization values. There are few things more emotionally taxing than spending precious working hours engaged in activities one has no affinity for. However, engaging in activities that cater to an individual's natural abilities and inclinations assists in finding meaning and developing a healthy sense of professional pride.

[In a previous article on engaged leadership](#), I highlighted the ongoing effort in my brigade to understand the drivers of both discontent and satisfaction, the goal being to resolve the former and enhance the latter. As my team gains understanding, we increasingly realize just how critical healthy competition is to the satisfaction of our soldiers. They regularly communicate their desire for competitive events, especially at the team and squad levels.

Their goal is not just bragging rights. It is professional fulfillment. If this fulfillment is found in being good at what the organization values, then healthy competition is a method to find out what that is. Competition is more than just a chance to show off. It is an opportunity to explore talents, abilities, and interests, and to match those to organizational priorities. It is also a chance to become familiar with the dynamics of the team and associate placement within that team.

Viewed through this lens, competition becomes more than a zero-sum game. The way one competes is often as important as the outcome. If winning is the only goal then the benefits of competition are fleeting. But if self-discovery is part of the process, then one reaps the permanent benefits of growth and improvement.

For example, a squad leader may have a soldier who is a subpar machine gunner. Despite robust remedial training, the soldier sees no improvement. Rather than continue to force the issue, the squad leader may find during warrior task training that this soldier excels in calling for indirect fire, throwing grenades, or land navigation. Having identified the latter to be the case, the squad leader makes this soldier his point man on patrols, wielding a compass and a rifle rather than the squad automatic weapon. Not only is the squad made better through good talent management, but the soldier also gains a sense of pride in being an asset to the organization.

To fully achieve this may require a servicemember changing occupational specialties. I was a decent infantryman, but I'm a much better civil affairs officer. Consequently, I am much more fulfilled in my professional life. I also work harder because the work is more meaningful to me. I know I'm bringing something unique to the table.

But the measures we take to match servicemembers to tasks they are naturally fitted to may not need to be so drastic. Even within occupational specialties there are numerous ways to shine. All it takes is an engaged leader willing to work with their subordinate to figure out what those are. Here I refer the reader to [the three-step engagement process](#) I articulated [in a previous article](#).

All this being said, it is impossible to enjoy every task we are assigned. Some tasks are just not interesting or well-suited to one's natural abilities, but they need to get done nonetheless. At these times it is especially incumbent on leaders to explain the purpose behind even menial tasks. Unlike the "because I told you so" approach, which is only valid if

time is a critical factor, explaining the purpose for tasks creates buy-in. It transforms the subordinate from a drone into a valuable and valued part of the team.

Not only is this good for the subordinate, it's great for the mission. When one has a reason to care about what he or she is tasked with, work quality improves and becomes easier to endure. [Viktor Frankl, a holocaust survivor and well-known psychiatrist, famously echoed Nietzsche in asserting](#), "He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*." Often all it takes to go the extra mile is to know that your work matters and that others are depending on you to do it well. This is true for the mundane tasks in life as well as for profound suffering. If a leader can't provide a good reason for doing the task, maybe he or she should reevaluate if it is worth doing in the first place. Maybe the leader should prioritize other actions that do have a purpose.

One may simplify these ideas by simply applying the golden rule. I know that I would rather work in areas I am naturally gifted for, so I should take that into account when tasking subordinates. I know I am much more eager to work if I know the purpose I am working toward, so I should take the time to explain that purpose to those I lead. When applied, both of these considerations inspire the healthy pride in the organization and the individuals who make it up.

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