

Running Head: PROFANITY IN THE ARMY

Profanity in the Army

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Is the use of profanity necessary in today's professional Army? You could base this question on one's personal opinion and attitude on the use of profanity. The image of a leader is either degraded or respected when Soldiers hear them using profanity. It has to be the right words at the right moment for it to work to the user's advantage or it could make a bad situation worse. Some may view the use of profanity as disrespectful for those who hear it. With a populace of highly educated and professional Soldiers in the Army today, can we, as leaders, be professional and still use profanity?

History

Profanity is more than just a bunch of "four-letter words" used to express a point. For some people it is a form of speech used in everyday communication, as in profane language or swearing. The word itself is being profane or as showing disrespect or contempt for sacred things (Webster's). The use of profanity can be an attempt to debase or treat with contempt, which is the feeling one has towards somebody or something that one considers low. Its origin was restricted to blasphemy, an offensive attack on religion and religious figures. As time passed, profanity evolved from blasphemy into an expression of vulgarity, racist and sexual topics in general. The main purpose was to humiliate or put down others with the use of speech. The evolution of profanity has now moved to a generalize way of talking and is more often expressed in a public settings. There was a time when men in private settings and conversations among themselves used profanity to talk to each other. Women, who now have a more active role in society, have entered into the "men talk" and have taken up profanity as a form of expression. Children and adolescents are now expressing what some may consider adult language and speak profanities as if it were a second language. Profanity is no longer limited to the closed doors of the pool halls and poker games. Profanity has become more and more a part

of the new culture so much so that we, as a professional Army and as leaders, must address. We drill it in the heads of our Soldiers and to each other to be professional! As leaders, our actions must display professionalism in every act that we, as leaders engage in. Our speech is included in those actions.

Profanity in the Army

“When I want my men to remember something important, to really make it stick, I give it to them double dirty. It may not sound nice to some bunch of little old ladies at an afternoon tea party, but it helps my Soldiers to remember. You can’t run an Army without profanity; and it has to be eloquent profanity. ... Sometimes I just, by God, get carried away with my own eloquence” (General George Patton).

The use of profanity is for some leaders a way to express their point. Others use it to intimidate those who threaten or challenge their authority. Some use profanity for a lack of a fair better word. Some leaders may view Patton’s claim that you cannot run an Army without profanity, as the unwritten military gospel. There are some places where the use of profanity maybe expected. A situation may call for a word or two of profanity to put someone “in check”. Some leaders may use profanity to break a Soldier’s attitude or bad behavior by humiliating them with the use of profanity. The goal here is to humble them into a more suitable attitude and behavior that is acceptable for the environment and standards of the Army. The practice of name-calling, swearing and the blatant use of profanity is nothing new to the Army.

General Washington addressed the issue of profanity in a letter written as a General Order. The letter is what we would call now an Equal Opportunity policy letter, which addressed giving the Troops the opportunity of attending public worship, rest after hard labor details and his apologies for the use of profanity that was spreading throughout the Army.

The letter Washington wrote addresses how he was sorry to receive information of the practice of cursing and swearing amongst his Soldiers. The use of profanity was often a vice of little use in the Army previously but was quickly growing. Washington hoped that the officers would set the example and influence others officers to stop it. “It is a vice so mean and low, without any temptation, that every man of sense, and character, detests and despises it” (General Washington Aug 1776).

The vice that Washington called “mean” and “low”, was the norm for hundreds of years to verbally abuse and to insult ones personal or professional character. Profanity has gained attraction among society to the point that it is a part of the everyday language that you cannot escape a day without hearing it. A leader’s educational background has no bearing on the use of profanity, what Washington called “every man of sense and character” is disproved, because many educated leaders choose to use profanity as a way of communicating to the Troops over “proper English”.

Profanity, of a vulgar nature, may lead one to judge a leader’s character as rude. If a leader uses profanity that is sexual in nature, it may lead another to judge his or her character as indecent. Judging a person that uses profanity, that is racist and sexist in nature, may be justifiable as such for the person who uses it that way. Far less tolerated these two extremes are in the Army and is often a career-ender for those who choose to endeavor in the practice.

It is a choice and not a right to use profanity. The very Constitution that we fight to protect also protects the speech we choose to use. Free speech is limited in the military to good order and discipline. Leaders must set the example and enforce good conduct standards. “Do as I say”, when it comes to profanity, has caught its wings and has really taken flight. Profanity has its time and place but, as a professional Army, we, as Non-commissioned officers must bear the

standard of conduct and say the right things. Leaders are required to conduct and enforce mandatory Equal Opportunity training with the consideration of others as the main intent of the training. Being in a leadership position in the United States Army also means that you are a public figure. Many leaders forget their status as a public figure with their actions and many times with their words. We are very cautious with the words that we put in writing. However, our speech is one thing that we use very carelessly. Speaking professionally is more than just standing up in front of an audience delivering a lecture. It is what we do daily. Dropping a few profanities would not be very professional in any situation.

The use of profanity is what some may call “slang” as a form of speech. The use of profanity as slang may not have malice intentions but as stated, it is a form of expression. It is the malice intentions that people have which is the most damaging effect when using profanity. The use of profanity to humiliate or put down someone can never be highlight of a true leader’s career. One would hope that the use of profanity is a last resort. I cannot truly say that there is a need for profanity in the Army but as I stated earlier it is a personal choose. As a part of full disclosure, I have from time to time expressed a few words myself. Some people may expect there to be profanity in the Army and to hear its use as a part of a normal military way of life. What one should also expect is to receive fair and equal treatment.

Respect is one prospect that a leader must consider when using profanity. Will one gain or lose the respect of other if he or she chooses to use profanity. If everyone would stop to think before speaking, it would probably save us all some hardship.

Conclusion

Words and actions are the measurements of leadership. The leadership styles of Washington and Patton are two notable examples, which we can always look to reflect upon. One is not greater than the other as both had their time in history. The use or disuse of profanity is a personal choice, and a leader must choose how, when and to what extreme, to motivate or admonish the Troops. Giving it to them a little dirty at times is a matter of one's own ethical dilemma.

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