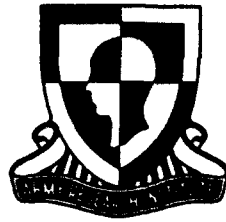


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U.S. Army Research Institute
for the Behavioral and Social Sciences

Research Report 1649

Soldier Perceptions of a Survey Question on "The Quality of Leadership and Management": Data From Ten Focus Groups

Joel M. Savell
U.S. Army Research Institute

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U.S. ARMY RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR THE BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words) This research sought to determine whether soldiers differ in their interpretation of a particular survey item (one that had been used in several recent surveys) and, if they do, what some of those differences are. The research was designed less to test ideas (or hypotheses) than to generate them. The item asked soldiers how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with "the quality of leadership and management" and provided four response alternatives ranging from "very satisfied" to "very dissatisfied." Forty officers and enlisted personnel, meeting in small groups that were homogeneous in rank, completed the survey, responded to a 2-item questionnaire concerning their interpretations of the item, and then participated in a follow-up discussion of those interpretations. Several generalizations (hypotheses) are suggested, along with some recommendations for revision.				
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Research Report 1649

**Soldier Perceptions of a Survey Question
on “The Quality of Leadership and Management”:
Data From Ten Focus Groups**

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FOREWORD

This research presents evidence that soldiers differ markedly in how they interpret a particular questionnaire item that has been used in several recent surveys. The item asks respondents to say, based on their Army experience, how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with the "quality of leadership and management."

The reason for the Army's interest in this item is that large percentages of enlisted personnel have indicated in their response to the item that they are "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied." The problem is that the item's terms of reference ("leadership and management") are extremely broad, and it has been difficult to know what soldiers had in mind when they responded.

As a result of this research, and in accord with the report's recommendations, the Army Personnel Survey Office and the Leadership Branch of the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel are considering revising the item before using it again.


EDGAR M. JOHNSON
Director

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SOLDIER PERCEPTIONS OF A SURVEY QUESTION ON "THE QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT": DATA FROM TEN FOCUS GROUPS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Requirement:

The goal of this research was to provide evidence on how soldiers interpret a particular survey item. The item has been used in several recent surveys and, because of its subject matter, is of considerable interest to the Army. In this item, soldiers are asked to say, based on their experience in the Army, "how satisfied or dissatisfied" they are with the "quality of leadership and management." Respondents are offered four response alternatives: Very Satisfied, Satisfied, Dissatisfied, and Very Dissatisfied. The reason for the interest in this item is that large percentages of enlisted personnel (in a recent survey, 55% of the lower-ranking enlisted) have indicated in their response to the item that they were "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied." Unfortunately, the item's terms of reference--"leadership and management"--are extremely broad; it is difficult to know what soldiers have in mind when they mark one of the alternatives.

Procedure:

Ten small groups of officers and enlisted personnel, homogeneous in rank, completed a 2-item questionnaire asking about their interpretations of a satisfaction-with-leadership-and-management item they had recently completed as part of a larger survey. The investigator then conducted, in each of the groups, a group interview using standard focus group procedures. The approach was that of "retrospective introspection," in which the participants were asked what had been in their minds when (an hour or so earlier) they had responded to the survey item. Data were obtained from participants' responses to the 2-item questionnaire, supplemented by the discussion leader's notes.

Findings:

The participants interpreted the survey item in markedly different ways. Depending on the level of the respondent, referent persons were mostly junior NCOs, senior NCOs, company grade officers, or field grade officers rather than being equally distributed across the several levels. In the case of NCOs, however, there appeared to be an equal tendency to think of officers

and of other NCOs. There was (with some exceptions) a tendency for participants to select referent leaders at the next higher level from themselves. This meant, as a minimum, their present boss, but typically it included one or more bosses from the recent past. Participants differed in how much difficulty they had in responding to the survey item, and one of the factors determining this difficulty seemed to be the number and diversity of individuals participants took into account in deciding how they would respond. Finally, participants differed in the kind of behaviors (i.e., whether it was mainly leadership-type behaviors or mainly management-type behaviors) that they brought to mind. That is, one or the other of these types of behavior tended to be given more weight depending on the respondent's job situation. In a combat or simulated-combat situation, however, all agreed that leadership-type skills would play a relatively larger part in their response.

Utilization of Findings:

The Army Personnel Survey Office and the Leadership Branch of the Human Resources Directorate of the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel will consider revising the item as recommended in the report.

SOLDIER PERCEPTIONS OF A SURVEY QUESTION ON "THE QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT": DATA FROM TEN FOCUS GROUPS

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SOLDIER PERCEPTIONS OF A SURVEY QUESTION ON "THE QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT": DATA FROM TEN FOCUS GROUPS

INTRODUCTION

This report sets forth the results of an exploratory investigation into how soldiers interpret a particular survey item. The item has been used in several recent surveys and, because of its subject matter, is of considerable interest to the Army. In this item soldiers are asked to say, based on their experience in the Army, "how satisfied or dissatisfied" they are with the "Quality of Leadership and Management." Respondents are offered four response alternatives: Very Satisfied, Satisfied, Dissatisfied, and Very Dissatisfied.

The Problem

The item is usually presented as one of a large number of similarly formatted items, with respondents being asked how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with such things as "amount of enjoyment from my job," "geographic location of jobs," and "access to education/training," as well as "quality of leadership and management." The reason for being interested in the satisfaction-with-the-quality-of-leadership-and-management item is that large percentages of enlisted personnel (in a recent Armywide Survey, 55% of the lower-ranking enlisted and 48% of the junior NCOs)¹ have indicated in their responses to this item that they were "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied."² In view of the considerable institutional attention given to leadership (see Headquarters, Department of the Army, 1990), reflecting the fact that an institution like the Army cannot function without it, the item clearly addresses an important issue. Unfortunately, the item's terms of reference ("leadership and management") are extremely broad; and it is difficult to know what soldiers have in mind when they mark one of the response alternatives.³ For example, when soldiers say they are "satisfied" or "dissatisfied" with the quality of leadership and management the reader or user of these data cannot tell who or what it is that the soldiers are

¹Data from the fall-1993 Sample Survey of Military Personnel (SSMP) conducted by the Army Personnel Survey Office. In the present (nonprofitability) sample the corresponding percentages were 64% and 60%.

²The questionnaire included two other items on leadership ("amount of respect from superiors" and "level of competence of supervisors"). Neither of these items, however, showed the high percentages of dissatisfaction shown by the "quality of leadership and management" item.

³For a discussion of this kind of problem, see Fowler, 1992; Payne, 1951; Schuman & Presser, 1981; Tanur, 1992.

with the quality of leadership and management the reader or user of these data cannot tell who or what it is that the soldiers are satisfied or dissatisfied with. Is it some generalized concept of "Army leadership and management"? Is it the soldiers' immediate supervisor? Is it their last two or three immediate supervisors (with satisfactions/dissatisfactions somehow averaged over the individuals referred to)? Is it their leader or commander two levels higher? Is it (in the case of respondents who are themselves leaders) a composite of the leaders with whom they currently interact--either at their own level or the level immediately below?

There are other ways in which the wording of this item makes it difficult to know what the responses mean. The item refers not just to leadership and not just to management (which are different things) but to both; and when soldiers indicate their degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction there is no way of knowing whether they are thinking mainly of leadership skills, mainly of management skills, both about equally, or leadership skills in the case of some leaders and management skills in the case of other leaders. Also, it is not clear whether soldiers, when they mark their response, are giving special weight to a particular (leadership or management) skill in making their judgments and, if so, what that (leadership or management) skill is.

Objective

As indicated above, the item is ambiguous in several respects;⁴ and one would expect, because of this ambiguity, that different soldiers would interpret the item in different ways. The present investigation sought to determine whether this is indeed the case--i.e., whether soldiers differ in the interpretations they give to the item and, if they do, what some of these interpretations are. The research was designed less to test ideas than to generate them.

METHOD

Overview

The procedure was fairly simple. Participants completed a 2-item questionnaire asking about their interpretations of a satisfaction-with-the-quality-of-leadership-and-management item they had completely shortly before as part of a larger survey and

⁴The ambiguity of this item was noted also in a recent paper by Hay and Tremble (1992, October).

then took part in an approximately-20-minute follow-up discussion of these interpretations.⁵

Participants

Participants were 40 soldiers, 16 officers and 24 enlisted personnel, as shown below:

- * 6 captains (O3)
- * 10 lieutenants (O1-O2)
- * 3 senior NCOs (E8)
- * 10 junior NCOs (E6)
- * 11 junior enlisted (E2-E4)

Thirty were male, and ten were female.

Procedure

In each of 10 groups the Investigator administered a standard Army survey instrument containing, as one of its items, an item asking respondents how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with the "Quality of Leadership and Management". After an extended discussion of some other issues (see footnote 5), group members were given a brief, 2-item questionnaire (Table 1) asking how difficult they had found the satisfaction-with-the-quality-of leadership-and-management item and what level of leadership they had in mind when they responded to it. After they completed this questionnaire and returned it to the Investigator, the

⁵The reason for the relatively small amount of time devoted to this investigation was that it was "piggybacked" onto another (previously-planned) investigation, "confidentiality issues in Army surveys", and the first three-quarters of each session focused on these confidentiality issues. Each session lasted a total of about 2 hours and consisted of the following: (a) administration of a standard Army survey instrument that included items varying in topic sensitivity, among them a relatively nonsensitive item (the focus of the present investigation) asking respondents how satisfied/dissatisfied they were with the quality of leadership and management in the Army; (b) administration of a brief (3-item) questionnaire concerning any confidentiality concerns that respondents may have had while completing the survey; (c) further (focus-group) discussion of these concerns; (d) administration of a 2-item questionnaire concerning respondent interpretations of the above-mentioned item on leadership and management; and (e) further (focus-group) discussion of these interpretations. The present report sets forth the results of the second of these two investigations. (Results of the other investigation will be reported separately.)

Table 1

Questions Addressing the Leadership Item

The survey asked you how satisfied or dissatisfied you were with the quality of leadership and management in the Army.

1. HOW EASY OR HARD WAS IT TO ANSWER THAT QUESTION?

- a. Very easy
- b. Fairly easy
- c. Neither easy nor hard
- d. Fairly hard
- e. Very hard

2. WHAT LEVEL OF LEADERSHIP DID YOU HAVE IN MIND WHEN YOU ANSWERED THE SURVEY QUESTION?

- a. Junior NCO
 - b. Senior NCO
 - c. Company grade officer
 - d. Field grade officer
 - e. General officer
-

Investigator conducted a group interview using standard focus group procedures (Krueger, 1988; Merton, 1946, 1990). The approach was that of "retrospective introspection" (Merton, 1990), in which (in the present case) soldiers were asked what had been in their mind when (an hour or so earlier) they responded to the item.

Data were collected at Fort Lewis in May 1993. Prior to the Investigator's arrival each participant had been assigned to one of 10 small groups that were homogeneous in rank (Table 2). Sessions were held each day, Monday through Friday, with one session in the morning and one in the afternoon.

RESULTS

Who/What the Respondents Had in Mind

An underlying question was whether, when participants were indicating their assessment of the quality of the Army's leadership and management, they had in mind certain real individuals and, if so, who (or at what level) these individual were. Did the soldiers think mainly of commissioned officers, or did they tend to think mainly of NCOs? And whichever of these was the case, did they think mainly of platoon-level leaders, company-level leaders, battalion-level leaders, or what?

One of the questionnaire items (Question 2 in Table 1) asked participants to say which of five leader levels they had in mind when they responded to the survey item: (a) junior NCO, (b) senior NCO, (c) company grade officer, (d) field grade officer, (e) general officer. These levels were coded 1 (junior NCO) to 5 (general officer); and scores for same-rank groups (groups 1 and 2, 3 and 4, etc.--see Table 2) were combined to produce five sets of scores, one set for each respondent group, with group *n*s ranging from 3 to 11 (Total *N*=40). For each of these five respondent groups a mean was computed for the coded leader levels selected by members of that group. Groups were then ranked according to the magnitude of the mean of these (coded) leader levels. Mean and standard deviation of scores for each respondent group are shown in Table 3, Question 2, and the entire set of responses to the two items is shown in the Appendix. As can be seen in Table 3 (Question 2), there is a perfect rank order correlation ($p < .05$) between the position/rank of the respondent group and the mean (coded) leader-level response selected as referents by the members of that group: the higher the rank of the respondent group, the higher the mean (coded) leader level selected by the group members as a referent in responding to the item. The data (including comments during the discussions) suggest that respondents had specific individuals in mind when answering the question, and comments in the discussion group support this.

Table 2

Number and Grade(s) of Participants in Each Group

Group Number	Grade Level of Group Members	Number of Soldiers in this Group
1	E2-E4	6
2	E2-E4	5
3	E6	5
4	E6	5
5	E8	1
6	E8	2
7	O1-O2	5
8	O1-O2	5
9	O3	3
10	O3	3

Table 3

Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses to Two Items Concerning the Survey Question

1. HOW EASY OR HARD WAS IT TO ANSWER THAT QUESTION?

POSITION/RANK OF GROUP MEMBERS	MEAN RESPONSE ^a	STANDARD DEVIATION
Lieutenant (n=10)	1.9	.83
Captain (n=6)	2.0	1.41
Junior Enlisted (n= 11)	2.1	1.08
Junior NCO (n=10)	2.5	.92
Senior NCO (n=30)	2.7	1.25

2. WHAT LEVEL OF LEADERSHIP DID YOU HAVE IN MIND WHEN YOU ANSWERED THE QUESTION?

POSITION/RANK OF RESPONDENT	MEAN RESPONSE ^b	STANDARD DEVIATION
Junior Enlisted (n=11)	2.2	.57
Junior NCO (n=10)	2.9	.72
Senior NCO (n=3)	3.0	.81
Lieutenant (n=10)	3.5	.50
Captain (n=6)	3.8	.56

^aThe higher the mean, the greater the reported difficulty in responding to the item by the respondents in that group.

^bThe higher the mean, the higher the position/rank of the individual(s) that respondents in that group selected as a referent: 1 = junior NCO, 2 = senior NCO, etc. (see Table 1).

As can be seen in Table 3, Question 2, junior enlisted (mean level chosen = 2.2) tended to select "senior NCO" as the person they brought to mind in responding to the survey item; junior NCOs (mean = 2.9) and senior NCOs (mean = 3.0) both tended to select company-grade officers; and commissioned officers tended to select "company-grade" or "field-grade officer". In the case of the lieutenants, half selected "company grade officer" and half selected "field grade officer". Follow-up discussions indicated that some of these lieutenants worked for a major and others worked for a captain and that, generally, they were responding to the item in terms of the individual (captain or major) for whom they currently and/or recently worked. In the case of captains, all but one selected "field grade officer" while one selected company grade officer and also senior NCOs. The general tendency was for junior enlisted to select NCOs, for NCOs to select both NCOs and officers, and for officers to select other officers ($X^2=11.0$, $df=2$, $p<.01$).

Perceived Difficulty of the Survey Item

One of the two questionnaire items (Table 1, Question 1) asked participants how easy or hard it was to answer the survey question and presented five response alternatives: Very Easy, Easy, Neither Easy Nor Hard, Hard, and Very Hard. The distribution of responses to this item is shown in Table 4. As can be seen, 27 of the 40 participants (68%) said they found the item easy to respond to; but 7 (18%) said they found the item hard, and another 6 (15%) selected the middle position ("neither easy nor hard"). In other words, a third of the respondents seemed not to find the item easy; and follow-up discussions confirmed that this was indeed the case. It is not known with certainty what distinguished respondents who found the survey item easy from those who found it hard, but a possibility supported by the available data is the number of different leader/manager levels respondents took into account in deciding how satisfied or dissatisfied they were. That is, greater the number of leader/manager levels respondents felt they had to take into account, the greater the difficulty in responding to the question. Supporting this idea is the fact that it was the NCOs who gave the item the highest difficulty rating; and it was these same NCOs who (more than any of the others) said that they were thinking of both officers and NCOs when they responded to the satisfaction/dissatisfaction item. In fact (see Table 5), the rank order of difficulty that groups had in responding to the survey item is perfectly correlated ($p<.05$) with the standard deviation of the number of referent groups chosen by individuals in these groups.

Table 4

Distribution of Responses to Questionnaire Item 1

RESPONSE ALTERNATIVE	NUMBER WHO SELECTED THIS ALTERNATIVE
a. Very easy.	14
b. Fairly easy.	13
c. Neither easy nor hard. .	6
d. Fairly hard.	7
e. Very hard.	0
	TOTAL 40

Table 5

Ranked Means of Difficulty in Rating Satisfaction by Members of Specified Respondent Groups and Standard Deviations of Coded Leader Levels Chosen by Members of These Groups

MEAN REPORTED DIFFICULTY IN RATING SATISFACTION WITH ARMY LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT ^a	STANDARD DEVIATION OF CODED LEADER LEVELS CHOSEN BY GROUP MEMBERS	RANK/POSITION OF GROUP MEMBERS
1.9 . . . . .	.50	Lieutenant
2.0 . . . . .	.56	Captain
2.1 . . . . .	.57	Junior Enlisted
2.5 . . . . .	.72	Junior NCO
2.7 . . . . .	.81	Senior NCO

^a The higher the mean, the greater the reported difficulty.

Leadership and/or Management

Finally, the discussions sought to determine whether participants, when they responded to the satisfaction-with-the-quality-of-leadership-and-management item, were thinking mainly of leadership skills, mainly of management skills, both about equally, or leadership skills in the case of some leaders and management skills in the case of other leaders. Participants were asked about the kinds of things they pictured their referent individuals doing when they brought these individuals to mind; and, when they responded, they were asked whether they viewed these things as mainly leadership, mainly management, or what. Responses to these probes suggested that participants from some kinds of units (e.g., those that spend more time in the field) think more in terms of leadership while those from other kinds of units (e.g., those that spend less time in the field) think more in terms of management. In any event, all agreed that being in a combat or simulated combat situation would increase the importance they would attribute to the skills of leadership.⁶

DISCUSSION

This investigation sought ideas about how soldiers interpret a particular survey item (an item asking soldiers how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with the quality of leadership and management). Based on group members' responses to the two questionnaire items and their comments in the follow-up discussion, several generalizations may be drawn:

Generalizations

1. The participants interpreted the item in markedly different ways.
2. For any given participant, the persons (leaders) brought to mind in responding to the item tended to be at a single level. That is (depending on the level of the respondent), participants' referent persons were mostly junior NCOs or mostly senior NCOs or mostly company grade officers or mostly field grade officers

⁶As noted earlier, one of the other items in the survey instrument asks soldiers how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with "level of competence of supervisors". The way soldiers interpret this item was not investigated in the present research, and it is not known what skills soldiers are thinking of when they mark their response to the item. Focus group discussions of the leadership-and-management item, however, suggested that competence (whatever the focus) is one--but only one--of a number of things respondents consider when evaluating their leaders.

rather than being equally distributed across these several levels. In the case of NCOs, however, there appeared to be an equal tendency to think of officers and of other NCOs.

3. There was (with some exceptions) a tendency for participants to select referent leaders at the next higher level from themselves. This meant as a minimum their present boss, but typically it included one or more bosses from the recent past. Junior enlisted thought mainly of senior NCOs, while NCOs (both junior and senior, though more so in the case of senior NCOs) thought mainly of company-grade officers. Lieutenants also thought of company-grade officers; but if they worked in an office headed by a major, they usually saw that major as their boss. Captains thought mostly in terms of field-grade officers.

4. Participants differed in how much difficulty they had in responding to the survey item. One of the factors determining this difficulty seems to be the number and diversity of individuals that participants took into account in deciding how they would respond. Those groups of participants (here, commissioned officers and junior enlisted) who as groups took into account leaders at fewer levels found the item less difficult, and those (here, NCOs--particularly senior NCOs) who as groups took into account leaders at more levels found the item more difficult. One would hypothesize that the survey responses of soldiers who found the item more difficult would be less reliable than the responses of participants who found the item less difficult.

5. Participants differed in the kind of behaviors (i.e., whether it was mainly leadership-type behaviors or mainly management-type behaviors) that they brought to their mind. That is, one or the other of these types of behavior tended to be given more weight depending on the job situation the respondent was in. Thus in an infantry unit the skills of leadership were said to play a larger role in respondent evaluations, while in a finance office it was said to be the skills of management. In a combat or simulated combat situation, however, all agreed that leadership-type skills would play a relatively larger part in their decision as to how they would respond to the item.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The main recommendation to come out of this research is that the item examined here be revised before it is used again. The nature of the revision will necessarily depend on the decision by the user of the information as to exactly what information is desired; and until such a decision is made, specific recommendations about item wording are premature. (In fact, depending on what the decision is, the item could end up being

replaced by two or more different items. In the meantime, however, some general recommendations can be made regarding the approach:

1. If the intention is to obtain soldiers' assessment of Army leadership and Army management, ask about these things separately--not as part of the same question. For most people the two words refer to different things, and some respondents may want to rate their leaders high on one and low on the other.

2. If the intention is to get soldiers' assessment of either one of these things (either leadership or management), do the kind of pretesting needed to insure that all respondents are interpreting the item the same way.

3. If the intention is to get soldiers' assessment of leadership or management at a given level (e.g., the immediate supervisor or the commander two levels up), be explicit as to what that level is. Soldiers seem to have difficulty bringing to mind something as amorphous as "Army leadership and management" and saying that they are satisfied or dissatisfied with it.

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APPENDIX
Responses to Questions 1 and 2 (Table 1), Shown Separately by
Respondent Position/Rank*

RESPONDENT POSITION/RANK	QUESTION		RESPONDENT POSITION/RANK	QUESTION	
	1	2		1	2
JUNIOR ENLISTED			SENIOR NCO		
1	b	c	22	d	c
2	d	b,c	23	c	b
3	b	b	24	a	d
4	b	c			
5	c	b	LIEUTENANT		
6	b	a	25	d	c
7	a	c	26	b	d
8	a	b	27	a	d
9	a	b	28	a	c
10	a	b	29	b	d
11	d	b	30	b	c
			31	b	c
JUNIOR NCO			32	a	d
12	c	c	33	b	c
13	b	c	34	b	d
14	b	c	CAPTAIN		
15	c	b	35	d	b,c
16	c	b	36	d	d
17	a	a,b,d	37	a	d
18	c	b	38	a	d
19	a	c	38	a	d
20	b	d	40	a	d
21	d	d			

*Three individuals (2, 17, and 35) marked more than one response to the second item. In each of these three cases the mean of the (two or three) scores was used as the score for that respondent.