

Recruit Abuse and the Company Officer's Role in Resolving It

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Recruit Abuse and the Company Officer's Role in Resolving It

Introduction

Staff Sergeant (SSgt) Hardcorps has just graduated from Drill Instructor School and is looking forward to training young civilians to become United States Marines. He had dreamt about being a drill instructor since he graduated from bootcamp six years earlier. He was always a stellar Marine. In Iraq, SSgt Hardcorps was awarded the Navy Cross for heroism. As he works his first platoon of recruits, SSgt Hardcorps notices that his fellow drill instructors are pushing, poking, and hitting their recruits. He recognizes this as a blatant violation of the Recruit Training Order (RTO). SSgt Hardcorps talks to his Senior Drill Instructor (SDI) about his observations. His SDI tells him that those drill instructors were training those recruits to become tough and that is how "real" drill instructors train their recruits. He also tells SSgt Hardcorps that his performance has been weak and that he needs to become more aggressive and demanding of his recruits; just like the drill instructors he observed hitting and pushing recruits. SSgt Hardcorps follows the example established by his SDI and peers, and before his first platoon graduates, SSgt Hardcorps is subjected to a court martial and is voided of his drill instructor military occupational specialty (MOS) for abusing recruits.

Are the officers of the recruit training depots failing their drill instructors? All officers are taught that they are responsible for everything their Marines do and fail to do. If a drill instructor violated the RTO and abuses a recruit, then that officer should evaluate his leadership and determine the cause of the drill instructor's actions. Unfortunately, there are a handful of officers who fail in this leadership responsibility. They either fail to influence the behavior of their drill instructors or they minimize

their role within the recruit training process. As a result, too many drill instructors are facing disciplinary action for abusing recruits. Mitigating recruit abuse aboard the recruit depots requires company officers to positively influence the behavior of their drill instructors by establishing a training environment founded on three leadership principles: developing moral values, team building, and leadership by example.

The Supervising Officer

Officer leadership has not always been a part of the recruit training process. The Ribbon Creek incident¹ in 1956 led to the restructuring of the recruit training depots introducing specially selected officers "to supervise and monitor but not to supplant the drill instructors in the training of recruits".² Fifty-three years later, officers continue to serve as supervisors and monitors. Despite the strong officer presence throughout the recruit training process, recruit abuse remains as a significant issue today as it did in 1956.

Why, after 53 years of officer oversight, is recruit abuse still an issue? A majority of the officers give a tremendous amount of energy and effort into mitigating recruit abuse; however, there are a handful of officers who are not doing their part. Captain Mike Feuquay who served as a series and company commander at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego states in an interview that many officers

¹ On 8 April 1956, six recruits drowned while SSgt Matthew McKeon marched his platoon into Ribbon Creek aboard Parris Island, SC. This event led to congressional inquiry into the safety of Marine Corps recruit training. As a result, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Pate order the establishment of a recruit training command at both recruit depots, Parris Island and San Diego. The recruit training command instituted officer oversight at series, company, regiment, and depot levels.

² Curtis, George. Matthew C. McKeon, the man court-martialed for the Ribbon Creek drowning, died. 30 November 2003. 19 February 2009 <<http://www.popasmoke.com/notam2/archive/index.php/t-4011.html>>.

become disenfranchised with their billet responsibilities shortly after checking into the Recruit Training Regiment.³ The words "supervise" and "monitor" do not sound or feel like what most officers are accustomed to... planning and leading. Many officers are shocked to discover that the recruit training schedule⁴, not the officer, dictates the training of recruits. This causes a handful of officers to succumb to the title supervisor and monitor, and their actions reflect their attitude.⁵ Instead of influencing the behavior of their drill instructors, the "supervising" officer will reduce the scope of their responsibilities to attending the training events they are required to attend as directed by the RTO. These officers fail to recognize two key points. First, the company officer plays an integral part in the training and development of both the recruits and drill instructors. Second, the company officer is in the best position to combat recruit abuse.

A company officer's responsibilities extend beyond supervising and monitoring the conduct of recruit training. He or she is also given the mission essential task of ensuring the safety and welfare of their drill instructors and recruits.⁶ In order to fulfill this task, the company officer must establish and maintain a proper training environment. This requires the officer to exercise leadership

³ Feuquay, Captain Michael E. Interview. Captain Edwin A. Espinete. 14 November 2009.

⁴ The training schedule dictates the recruit's daily schedule. This document is published by the Recruit Training Regiment Operations Officer. Authority to alter the training schedule is granted to only battalion commanders when weather conditions threaten the safety of recruits.

⁵ Even though the officer's official billet ends with commander, he or she may still view themselves as solely a supervisor. They do not feel like "real" commanders because company officers are limited in decision making authority.

⁶ "Recruit Training Order, Depot Order 1513.6A." 5 December 2005. Marine Corps Recruit Depot. 18 February 2009
<<http://www.mcrdpi.usmc.mil/training/units/rtr/dischool/DepO%20P1513-6A%20RTO.pdf>>.

and provide clear guidance to their drill instructors; influencing the drill instructors' behavior. Officers who fail to accomplish this task allow other forces⁷ to influence their drill instructors' behavior which often leads to recruit abuse.

Because the "supervisor" officer fails to view himself as a leader, his approach towards managing recruit abuse mimics that of a law enforcement officer. From his perspective, he is only responsible for enforcing the rules stated within the RTO. He essentially becomes the protector of the rules vice the leader of drill instructors. Instead of taking action to mitigate recruit abuse before it occurs, the "supervisor" officer reacts to its occurrence. He may also encourage his drill instructors to follow the rules because it is the law, not because it is the right thing to do.

Whenever an incident of recruit abuse occurs, "supervisor" officers often feel the need to take immediate action against his drill instructors. The offending drill instructor may receive the brunt of the punishment, but his fellow drill instructors may also feel that they are being punished. This feeling stems from policies imposed on and threats against the drill instructors to deter them from abusing recruits. The result is a negative and hostile environment that detracts the drill instructors from focusing on their mission.

Establishing the Right Environment

The key to mitigating recruit abuse is to establish a positive training environment founded on moral values, teamwork, and leadership. The recruit training mission is to, "Make Marines who are committed to

⁷ Other forces influencing the behavior of drill instructors include other drill instructors whose thoughts about training recruits contradict the parameters established within the RTO.

our core values in service to our country.”⁸ A significant amount of time is dedicated to teaching recruits the Marine Corps’ core values. Most officers assume that their drill instructors possess the values they are responsible for instilling into recruits. If this were the case, recruit abuse would not be an issue affecting the recruit depots. Kouzes and Posner state, “Values serve as guides to action.”⁹ The responsibility of the company officer is to align the values of his drill instructors with the institutional values they are directed to instill. “Shared values make a significant positive difference in work attitudes and performance.”¹⁰ Developing values requires the company officer to conduct himself to the standard established by the Marine Corps and implementing a values-based training program for his drill instructors.

Instilling a values-based training program for drill instructors requires company officers to habitually talk to their drill instructors about values, expectations, ethics, and stress management. Discussions must be open and participation by all encouraged. This type of forum provides the drill instructors with an outlet to express their grievances. This also provides the company officer with insight into the thoughts, attitude, and morale of his drill instructors, aiding in his effort to build an effective team.

Team Building

Team building is another essential element to creating an effective environment. “The purpose of team building is to increase cohesiveness, mutual cooperation, and identification within the

⁸ Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island Mission and Vision. 2006. 18 February 2009 <<http://www.mcrdpi.usmc.mil/training/mission.asp>>.

⁹ Kouzes, J. M. and B. Z. Posner. The Leadership Challenge. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

¹⁰ Kouzes, J. M. and B. Z. Posner. The Leadership Challenge. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

group.”¹¹ To begin the team building process, the company officer must align the values of his drill instructors with that of the institution. It’s not enough to assume that all drill instructors possess the same values and their values align with the Corps’; if this were the case, then recruit abuse would not be an issue. Aligning values requires the company officer to find out what values each drill instructor holds as important, finding similarities between the values of the individual drill instructors and the officers, and utilizing those common values to establish a uniform set of values shared by each individual. Establishing a shared set of values creates a positive environment developed by all who is affected by it. Because the drill instructors were involved in the creation of the environment they are more likely to ensure its success. They will also be more likely to police themselves and hold each other accountable. What is created is a dynamic team working together under a same set of beliefs to achieve a common goal. When an incident of abuse does occur, the team must talk about how the incident occurred, re-evaluate their values, and take measures to ensure that the incident does not occur again. The individual who committed the act must be treated and punished appropriately.

Leadership by Example

Setting an appropriate leadership example is perhaps the most important principle of leadership. The example a company officer sets establishes the type of environment that will exist within his company or series. The established environment will directly influence the behavior of the drill instructors. The company officer must feel that his drill instructors want to be led, and that he is the person to lead

¹¹ Yukl, G. Leadership in Organizations. Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006.

them. "Leading means you have to be a good example, and live what you say."¹² "Supervisor" leaders often contradict themselves. Their actions may portray an attitude that says, "Do as I say, not as I do." This type of message can create a negative environment within the unit and impact the performance and attitude of the drill instructors.

"Exemplary leaders go first. They go first by setting the example through daily actions that demonstrate they are deeply committed to their beliefs."¹³ If a company officer wants to effectively influence the behavior of his drill instructors, then he must exemplify the desired behavior through his personal action. Kouzes and Posner state that one of the best ways of proving something is important is by doing it yourself. They also state that leadership is not about personality; it is about behavior.¹⁴

If a company officer wants to develop certain values within his drill instructors, he must exemplify that same behavior. If he wants to create a positive environment that inspires ethical behavior and teamwork, then the company officer must be positive and inspiring. The company officer must live the values he wants to instill into his drill instructors if he is going to implement change. These values can not be transferred if the company officer's character does not comprise the desired values.

There are other tools available to company officers to create an effective environment; many of which are currently being utilized. These tools ensure a high level of morale and include positive

¹² Kouzes, J. M. and B. Z. Posner. The Leadership Challenge. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

¹³ Kouzes, J. M. and B. Z. Posner. The Leadership Challenge. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

¹⁴ Kouzes, J. M. and B. Z. Posner. The Leadership Challenge. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

feedback, time off, and awards. Drill instructors must see that their officers are involved and care about their welfare. "By establishing a positive environment, drill instructors will be equipped to handle the stress of training recruits,"¹⁵ says Captain Feuquay.

Conclusion

While most drill instructors execute their duties in accordance with the RTO, there are a handful of drill instructors who contradict the values they are charged with instilling. Ensuring that drill instructors possess these values is vital to the success of the recruit training mission and the Marine Corps as a whole. Company officers are responsible for ensuring the moral development of their drill instructors, establishing unity through team building, and providing leadership that enhances the drill instructors ability to perform their duties. These concepts facilitate a positive environment that benefits the Marine Corps, the drill instructors, and the recruits being trained. Company officers must harness the important role they play within the recruit training process. Those officers who minimize their responsibilities to that of a supervisor, place their drill instructors' and recruits' welfare at risk. Contrarily, those officers who view themselves as leaders will maintain the initiative and create a positive environment that diminishes recruit abuse.

Word Count:1925

¹⁵ Feuquay, Captain Michael E. Interview. Captain Edwin A. Espinete. 14 November 2009.

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