Rules vs. Standards: Why a Focus on Minutia Inhibits Performance

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It must not be forgotten that it is especially dangerous to enslave men in the minor details of life…
It does not drive men to resistance, but it crosses them at every turn, until they are led to surrender the exercise of their own will.

- Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America

Within Army culture there is a basic misunderstanding regarding Standards and Rules. They are not the same, despite a long-standing military belief in equivalence. Mistaking the two explains much of the gap between leaders, especially senior leaders, and lower echelons. This gap is created through a constant refrain of ’enforcing Standards,’ expressed by unit-wide emails covering topics from traffic laws and parking to medical appointments. Too often, leaders do not understand that aggressively enforcing Rules, especially those consisting of minutia and unrelated to unit performance, actually distracts from the adherence to Standards and creates a culture not espoused in Army Doctrine.

Too many leaders spend limited interactions with subordinates lecturing on personal matters having little to no impact on mission success or unit effectiveness, rather than focusing on unit performance and core competencies. Though some personal conduct obviously relates to professional Standards, such as fitness, appearance, and bearing, much is irrelevant. I once listened to a Battalion Commander extemporize about the dangers of smoking during an operations meeting at NTC when the topic was scheduling training lanes and preparing for a follow-on attack mission during a Decisive Action rotation. Sadly, this type of preening moralizing is far too common and frequently comes as a distraction. Though unintended, actions like this reduce subordinates to mere clients, who are permitted only minimal action and influence; rather than the innovative Soldiers who utilize disciplined initiative as envisioned by ADP 6-0 Mission Command.

That is not to say that Rules do not have their place, nor to advocate gross, willful disobedience. Discipline is, as Napoleon said, “the soul of an army.” Indeed, a lazy criticism of this article is “If you don't ensure your unit follows Rules, then you don't have a disciplined unit.” That is a callow response that ignores the issues in the Rules vs. Standards argument: professionalism, individual initiative, and unit priorities. Just as increased prevalence of laws tends to breed contempt of law itself, leaders who
focus on minutia and Rules at the expense of Standards will find their subordinates increasingly overwhelmed, consequently eroding discipline and, just as important, focus. [1] Promoting Rules over Standards reprioritizes subordinates’ conduct and espouses the unit’s priorities in a pejorative manner. Though Soldiers need general guides of conduct (Rules), their leaders must create the cognitive space, freedom, and time required innovate. Therefore, it is essential to understand the difference between Standards and Rules and how they each affect behavior.

**Definitions**

To address this issue, we must define the terms. According to Webster’s, Rules are a “guide for conduct or action,” prescribing how to do actions in terms of details.[2] Therefore, Rules are bureaucratic in nature. They determine how we drive, conduct business, and dress, generally obvious things that require little explanation and, therefore, little thought in application. They also require little oversight on the part of leaders, who should expect that subordinates already know and obey Rules. However, even if personnel occasionally fail to follow the Rules, enforcement should never take precedence over promoting adherence to Standards. Just as the police do not watch every single stop sign daily—how could they with limited time, resources, and conflicting priorities—leaders cannot focus on the minutia of Rules because simple compliance is not overly important to unit success.

Standards, on the other hand, are “established by authority, custom, or general consent as a[n] example,” according to Webster’s.[3] Put simply, Standards are an approved way of doing things used as a basis of comparison. Standards must be measurable and, therefore, have a minimum against which leaders evaluate performance. Standards exist within the culture of an organization; they consist of not just cultural artifacts, but also shared values and are built on the basic assumptions of the organization.[4] In many ways, Standards define the organization and what membership within it entails. Army unit Standards should link to both individual and collective performance, i.e. the unit’s Mission Essential Tasks (MET). It is of little use and even greater waste of time to say something is the 'standard' when it lacks evaluation criteria or a link to the unit's mission. Like a corporate mission statement, Standards define the unit's purpose and, largely, its morale.

Rules and Standards are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they often overlap. For example, the Rules for Army Dress (AR 670-1) contain specific Standards for haircuts, shaving, uniform appearance, etc. We should note, however, that AR 670-1 is only a Standard because it provides an approved example from authority and relates to performance, in terms of personal appearance. However, in some units such as Special Forces teams, the mission requirements are different, as are the expectations of performance; as a result AR 670-1 is not viewed as a Standard, but a Rule. So long as the distinction is clear and related to performance, this is not an issue.

It is important to note that where overlap occurs between Standards and Rules, the important portion relates to the Standard. Many aspects of personal behavior also fall within the realm of Standards. We cannot tolerate sexual assault or bigots within our ranks, not because it is against the Rules—though it is—but because it falls below our Standards of behavior for membership in the Army; in this case the Standard and Rule overlap since Army Culture mimics the Uniform Code of Military Justice. As far as the professional is concerned, however, the issue of concern is not the violation of a Rule, but behavior that falls below the Standard.

To use a contemporary example, despite predictions that performance would suffer and disorder would spread within the ranks, the US Military effectively incorporated homosexuals within an 18-month period. [5] The forecasted disorder and disruption did not occur. In fact, one UCLA study indicated that morale had improved across the force.[6] Why did this occur? Because no Standards changed during the process;
Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines did not lose their service or unit identity because ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,’ ended. That identity, and the comradery it engendered, remained unaffected, because Standards did not change. To be sure, some Rules changed, but it had little effect. Conversely, many in the military are much more hesitant to integrate women into combat units (Infantry, Armor, etc.) because they feel that to accomplish that policy Standards would inevitably slip.[7]

When Standards are compromised, it causes issues within units and across the Army. For example, despite an update last year, the Army Height-Weight regulation (AR 600-9) remains essentially the same: a regulation establishing a Standard for appearance. One of the causes of an update was pervasive lack of adherence to the regulation across the Army. During the previous 10 years, Commanders and First Sergeants were routinely told to ‘meet mission.’ As a result, Soldiers were routinely ‘taken care of’ if they reported overweight to a military school and not immediately flagged when they failed the body fat test. While the reasons were arguably rational, not adhering Standards eroded trust within units. Not enforcing a Standard is a failure of leadership because doing so corrodes discipline; however, not enforcing a Rule with the same vigor is simply a leader’s application of discretion.

The same violation of Standards occurred during the height of the Iraq War as the Army, along with the Marines, struggled to meet recruiting goals.[8] In 2004, the Army began addressing impending shortfalls in accessions by implementing a variety of procedures, including an increase in ‘Moral Waivers,’ given to recruits with histories of drug use or criminal records. These waivers increased from a historic level of 3% to over 10% in 2007.[9] Though the Army met its recruiting goals in 2005-2007, using methods like Moral Waivers—reducing Standards—was questionable due to the long-term damage to the profession.

An order should not trespass upon the province of a subordinate. It should contain everything that the subordinate must know to carry out his mission, but nothing more... Above all, it must be adapted to the circumstances under which it will be received and executed.

- FM 100-5 (1939)

A Matter of Focus and Trust

In order to establish an effective command climate, leaders must set, describe, and ruthless enforce Standards. Enforcing Standards is more difficult than myopically fixating on the easier minutia of Rules. Our leaders too often mistake effort for effect, disregarding the Mission Orders concept outlined in ADP 6-0 Mission Command. Focusing on Rules fails to create the environment where subordinates can exercise disciplined initiative, which is “action in the absence of orders, when existing orders no longer fit the situation, or when unforeseen opportunities or threats arise.”[10] On the other hand, ruthlessly promoting and enforcing Standards enhances unit competence and esprit de corps while allowing leaders to focus on key issues. Furthermore, leadership that prioritizes Rules over Standards—or promulgates non-essentials as Standards when they are not—will inevitably find a growing "disconnect" between rhetoric and the units’ performance.[11]

Leaders must understand the impact of their communications: by how they establish and espouse priorities. It does no good for the commander to lay out fantastic Standards-based training plans with specific priorities and then emphasize the opposite in his or her everyday actions. Failure to backup words with actions creates cognitive dissonance in subordinates, a major cause of stress in units. Leaders who emphasize Rules over Standards disconnect themselves from their Soldiers, who want to be in first-rate units that hold themselves to high-standards. Lastly, promoting rule adherence over performance Standards
will generate exactly that: a unit of clients who adhere to the **Rules**, often to the detriment of the unit at large.

**Impact of Technology**

Technology exacerbates the misunderstanding between **Rules** and **Standards**. While this is certainly a long-term trend—von Moltke identified the wire telegraph as a threat to the independence of subordinate commanders in 1859—management via technology is now pervasive and immediate. \[12\] Commanders and senior leaders often use email to provide guidance, information, and other updates. This makes sense as a means to reach the entire unit from time to time; however, this type of communication should not take the place of face-to-face interaction. If used too often, and for the wrong topics, these communications eventually become background noise and indistinguishable from incessant 'pings' from various staff sections. Additionally, this leadership via email tends to focus on bureaucratic minutia as opposed to true command guidance; something about sending a message allows the sender to focus on topics left unsaid in personal interaction.

For example, a senior leader disseminates guidance on wear of the gray fleece cap via email. To make sure the audience knows the sender is right, he first cites a portion of the relevant Army Regulation before enumerating additional, local guidance, often in excess of the regulation. The leader then employs a vague allusion to professionalism, usually in the form of a slogan or quote, equating something like tobacco use in government buildings to the ethos of professionalism. Never mind that true professionalism involves a collective sense of service and competence within the realm of military expertise. \[13\]

This is the wrong approach for several reasons. First, everyone already knows the **Rules**: simply restating them is redundant. If we intend our Soldiers to act as adults and professionals, then we should treat them as such. We can begin by assuming they will not commit felonies in the absence of strict reminders from leaders. Nevertheless, the real damage comes from the message’s content itself as well as the medium. Leaders reaching directly to every subordinate to talk about minutia rather than broader issues such as professional development, budget impacts, and unit training sends the wrong signal. Email as a medium deprives the sender of the ability to relay context in the form of facial expressions, nuanced pauses, and other visual cues, forcing the responsibility for determining the message’s relative importance onto the reader. Given the large number of readers, this obviously creates problems in perception and understanding. In addition, by sending relatively trivial information, often masked by hollow slogans, at the expense of the truly relevant and important, the sender illustrates the worst aspects of what Dr. Wong calls “The Army’s Culture of Cultural Change,” such as a tendency to overstate problems and to ‘hand wave’ actual change. \[14\]

Lastly, there is the issue of the leader’s priorities. Inherent in the communication, the leader effectively outlines his priorities. This simple example illustrates some of the cognitive dissonance that exists between what Soldiers see daily contrasted with leader actions. In the case of a policy implemented through email, subordinate leaders are inevitably directed to enforce the new policy, but the email itself has already cut them out by speaking directly to the command; senior leaders are already saying and directing what is important, even if mismatched from what Soldiers see daily. Emails are inevitably devoid of context, especially when they focus on minutia.

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*Great successes presuppose bold risk-taking. But careful thought must precede the taking of risks.*

- Helmuth von Moltke, Prussian Chief of Staff
Relation to the Profession

At a higher level, leadership via email erodes Army professionalism. Writ large, messages in the vein of the example emphasize compliance rather than individual responsibility. Only the latter corresponds to professionalism. The message tells the unit to do what is correct, as opposed to what is right. Furthermore, by endorsing such shallow aspects of what it means to be a Soldier, the sender endorses a definition of professionalism as “…little more than well-kept haircuts, shaved faces, bloused boots, and saying “sir” at the end of every sentence…”[15] Taken at face value, messages such as these endorse the worst aspects of a zero-defect mentality at the expense of true professionalism.

Commanders make an impact through the ruthless application and adherence to Standards of performance. These Standards, however, must relate to the unit’s mission in order to effectively drive performance. It does no good for a commander to lecture the unit about minutia—or perceived minutia—if not personally involved, demonstrating how it is tied to unit performance. LTG Van Ripper described this lack of intellectual engagement, as “leadership by slogan.”[16] If broadcast via email, and no other medium, the leader inherently shows that the topic is not a priority; otherwise, he would personally espouse it.

The relationship between Rules and Standards is analogous to the relationship between managers and leaders. While there is certainly some overlap, the distinction is clear, both in civilian and military sectors. Managers use Rules because they are inflexible and simpler; managers simply add more Rules when faced with a problem, coercing people toward a solution. A leader, on the other hand, seeks to enforce Standards through accountability, demonstration, and shared effort when confronting problems.

Conclusion

An overzealous focus on Rules and minutia degrades initiative throughout an organization because it inevitably creates a culture of mindless adherence at the expense of rational thought. Admiral Hyman Rickover expressed his abhorrence of this predilection toward micromanagement: “Rules are the lowest common denominator of human behavior…a substitute for rational thought.”[17] A best, Rules emphasize what not to do at the expense of positive behavior. At the worst, emphasizing Rules over Standards creates leaders focused on a façade of order to please superiors, a careerist environment of the worst sort.

The importance of individual initiative throughout the Army cannot be overstated. A series of initiatives from Regionally Aligned Forces to an updated DA PAM 600-3 emphasize the Army’s need to “manage and apply talent more effectively to maximize individual potential…”[18] While the Army bureaucracy hopefully adjusts to implement these changes, a good place to start is how we communicate priorities. Creating an environment of disciplined initiative begins with trusting that subordinates follow Rules without micromanagement and perform mission tasks to published Standards.

Understanding the difference between Rules and Standards does not mean leaders simply ignore Rules in order to generate performance according to desired Standards. We all know we need to follow the Rules, be they uniform wear, traffic laws, or UCMJ. Leaders need to punish rule breakers accordingly; however, they should not direct attention to those Rules at the expense of core values and Standards of performance. As expressed by GEN Perkins in the latest Army Operating Concept, “Leaders at all levels must encourage prudent risk taking and not allow bureaucratic processes to stifle them.”[19] Placing a rabid fascination with Rules ahead of performance Standards is exactly the opposite of this guidance; doing so detracts from performance and poorly allocates our most precious resource, time.

Ruthlessly enforcing Standards—rather than Rules—through reward and punishment is part of the difference between leaders and managers. We must have an Army culture that understands the difference,
one that upholds Standards to promote unit effectiveness and esprit de corps while returning Rules to their proper place in the background. As a wise Battalion Commander once to me, “Great leaders understand when to break the Rules and the absence of failure does not constitute success.” Professionals understand that words have meaning and that leading means making tough choices. Army leaders need to start by making the harder, but simpler choice, to focus on Standards over Rules.

End Notes

[1] For background on the contempt of order brought about by excessive rules see Seeing Like a State by James C. Scott (2008) and Three Felonies A Day by Harvey Silvergate (2011)


[19] TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, Army Operating Concept, (October, 2014), v.

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