

# Sabotaging Ourselves

## Processes overriding intent

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In 1944, the Office of Strategic Services published the *Simple Sabotage Field Manual*.<sup>1</sup> The manual outlines a variety of simple actions that can together disrupt an entire organization’s or nation’s operations by targeting its individuals, groups, cognitive processes, and physical infrastructure. Section 11: *General interference with Organization and Production* describes techniques that the U.S. Government identified as particularly effective for individuals to sabotage organizational productivity:

- (a) Organizations and Conferences:  
(1) Insist on doing everything through “channels.” Never permit short-cuts to be taken in order to expedite decisions ... (3) When possible refer all matters to committees, for “further study and consideration.” Attempt to make the committees as large as possible—never less than five ... (b) Managers and Supervisors ... (5) Haggle over precise wordings of communications, minutes, resolutions ... (7) Insist on perfect work in relatively un-important products.

Although these are likely not verbatim excerpts from unit standard operating procedures, we are all intimately familiar with these types of behaviors. For many of this manual’s instructions to sabotage other nations, one can make clear or tangential connections to our very own procedures, policies, and common practices across the Marine Corps. After reading through this manual, we found ourselves asking, “Are we, as the Marine Corps, sabotaging ourselves?” Although initially a rhetorical question and half-hearted joke, after some introspection we began to realize that our organization is, in fact, sabotaging itself, and that in doing so, inhibits a holistic approach to readiness, stifles creativity, and severely limits our ability

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to remain ready to fulfill our Nation’s calling.

The Marine Corps and DOD at large have unwittingly institutionalized and embraced self-sabotaging practices. The weight of innumerable (and often conflicting) orders and directives, demand for unbending adherence to impossible-to-maintain inspection requirements, and other prescriptive administrative burdens has effectively stripped our tactical-level organizations of their ability to operationally compete. At its foundation, our self-sabotage is the result of a systematic lack of trust in mid-grade and junior leaders, and its impacts are felt the most at the lowest levels of our organization.

### Requirements

The Army War College Strategic Studies Institute commissioned a 2002 study that found that a company commander has 256 days to conduct training annually but is required to complete the equivalent of 297 training days to complete their mandated training.<sup>2</sup> We suspect that if the Marine Corps were to conduct a similar study today, it would return similar or worse results. The demands on small unit leaders only grow when considering promotion-required professional military education, pre-deployment requirements, training exercises, Fleet Assistance Program,

collateral duties, encouraged off-duty education, and equipment maintenance. In the true sense of the word, there is *literally* not enough time in a year to accomplish everything that we deem essential without having to cut corners and jeopardize our junior leaders’ integrity. Along similar lines of the Commandant’s and Air Force Chief of Staff’s message in their recent *Washington Post* opinion piece, we must redefine how we see readiness.<sup>3</sup> The current readiness definition is antiquated, broadly defined, and ambiguous. We struggle to even fully identify what all the requirements are and what their priority is as there are many hidden ancillary requirements buried in obscure orders. We must find ways to more efficiently and effectively define readiness in a manner that accounts for time and actual effects instead of skewed metrics. The largest challenge is that true readiness is likely difficult to capture with statistics and data.

The guidance provided in *MCBUL 1500, MCO 1500.63*, and in other subsequent MARADMINs (e.g. *694/20* and *188/17*) states that leader-led classes are encouraged and the preferred means for ancillary training. On the surface, this is an effective approach because it allows leaders to engage in meaningful discussion with subordinates and decentralizes execution to the lowest

levels. In practice and implementation, the task becomes more complicated, and the initial guidance is almost forgotten. As an example, the principles embodied by the Unit Marine Awareness and Prevention Integrated Training (UMAPIT) program are certainly important and should be regularly incorporated into interactions between Marines and their leaders. While the intent behind mandatory UMAPIT training is good, it rarely achieves its desired end state. *MARADMIN 044/20* requires that UMAPIT training sessions take no less than 90 minutes to complete, but the training, as prescribed, realistically requires much longer. In addition, each UMAPIT session is restricted to no more than 30 Marines and the instructor should be a certified UMAPIT facilitator. Because most unit leaders already have difficulty finding time to attend courses for obscure certifications, the requirement to train UMAPIT facilitators often gets delegated to lower-ranking staff NCOs or sergeants with limited spheres-of-influence and experience. In today's overscheduled reality, UMAPIT and other types of ancillary training turn into a rushed, mass-produced slideshow presentation and unidirectional conversation tailored to no one in particular, and Marines once again find themselves on the receiving end of another required annual training brief. The training becomes a check in the box.

UMAPIT training includes discussing stress management, suicide awareness, substance abuse, domestic abuse, and child abuse/neglect. Are our leaders not competent enough to discuss these things with their Marines without being put in a box? When we categorically prescribe training like this, we make the means the ends in order to meet our annual objectives, and the true intent behind the training is lost to "getting it over with." This practice has turned our leaders into unimaginative *relayers* who no longer feel responsible for their Marines' understanding of the issue. Instead of tight-knit personalized training at the smallest level possible, we opt for the more efficient route of belt-feeding Marines en masse through impersonal, manufactured PowerPoint briefs. We find ourselves operating on assump-

tions that may or may not be true. *Every Marine attended the training on sexual assault; therefore, they all know who they can go to for a restricted report.* By overprescribing training requirements across the board, we, as an organization, have deprived ourselves of our ability to innovate, generate buy-in from junior Marines and ultimately meet the intent of these training requirements. Any leader that is considered competent should be able to lead the talking points of UMAPIT or similar programs, and they can implement it in a way where they know their Marines will receive it the most effective manner. It could be a Friday discussion before a 96, in the field, on a TAD trip, or part of routine counseling; it really should not matter but given the broad guidance and points of emphasis a Marine leader should be allowed to determine how to achieve the best effects for their Marines.

### Creativity

Our standard practice for training is inherently Sisyphean—no matter how hard we work to achieve "100 percent readiness," we can never truly achieve it and will always find ourselves starting back at 0 percent each year.<sup>4</sup> In our opinion, many ancillary training events are designed to protect the force's public reputation from future bad press by providing detailed but distant metrics. The problem with aggregates, however, is that they rarely capture the true state of an organization because they are incapable of detailing the unquantifiable, which is inherent to human behavior. Although necessary and helpful for any organization, such metrics should be *descriptors*, not definitions of our goals. In other words, "metrics [should] only provide evidence that we are meeting our goals."<sup>5</sup> In our experience, our training process is the opposite. Instead of pursuing the true intent behind any given training requirement, we make the achieving 100 percent our ultimate ends. Practically speaking, it will always be impossible to train 100 percent of Marines in any given training event across the force, yet we still demand nothing less each year. This zero-defect mentality often puts our leaders in difficult moral positions as they feel

pressure to meet annual requirements. Moreover, because we let metrics define our goals, we often see marginal to no improvement among the target population when we do meet these training requirements every fiscal and calendar year. One of the unintended consequences that is occurring is that leadership is being exported to outside entities and leaders get a false sense of absolution. There are many great resources that have become available through, medical channels, the VA, and other entities that can be utilized to treat nutrition deficiencies, mental health concerns, marital assistance, financial planning, etc. What these programs do not replace is engaged leadership. These resources utilize metrics to produce false positive results—showing utilization of resources but not necessarily tracking results. Leadership cannot be exported away from those that have buy in. It is not impossible to implement creative solutions to administrative tasks, develop training plans that are actually valuable, and influence positive change.

The Marine Corps has long prided itself on being capable of doing more with less. This should be attributed to our rich history of innovation and creativity, whereas other Services can often purchase a solution, we have historically improvised through creating our own solutions. Today, however, we often find ourselves struggling to develop innovative, organic solutions to problems, despite access to the newest technologies. In his research on our evolved education system's effect on child creativity, Dr. Peter Gray finds that a restrictive environment minimizes the ability for children to be creative.<sup>6</sup> He cites Kyung Hee Kim—another researcher studying the effect of one's environment on creativity—in saying that "[c]reativity is nurtured by freedom and stifled by the continuous monitoring, evaluation, adult-direction, and pressure to conform that restrict children's lives today."<sup>7</sup> In a similar manner, we stifle Marines' buy-in and desire to contribute because they often come to see themselves as small, insignificant components to a very large machine. Harvard Business Professor Teresa Amabile states in her 1998 *Harvard Business Review* article

“How to Kill Creativity,” “creativity is undermined unintentionally every day in work environments that were established—for entirely good reasons—to maximize business imperatives such as coordination, productivity, and control.”<sup>8</sup> We are arguing that part, if not much of the Marine Corps’ problem with remaining ready derives from our restrictive, top-down, approach to training and management, which often emphasizes uniformity over development.

### Trust

The overarching intent of annual administrative training does make sense—refresh Marines’ knowledge on policies, improve health, protect systems, and protect the force. These are well-intentioned objectives, but we oftentimes turn the means into the ends in order to prove to higher authority our compliance with regulations. When this happens, we dilute the true meaning of the training and spend more time on proving compliance than ensuring understanding and influencing change. At the root of this issue is trust. We claim that we value decentralized decision making, but is that so? It should not have to be an uphill fight for leaders to earn trust and be creative—those characteristics should exist across the ranks, which have proven themselves through screening and experience. Trust is earned, yes, but there are institutional inconsistencies in the means of how trust is gained. As leaders, we are charged to not only train more proficient Marines but also to develop responsible citizens. The prevalent mindset of needing to prove compliance through removed administrative measures of effectiveness, vice practical measures such as improved morale, healthier Marines, and improved citizenry, needs to end. A signed roster proves nothing aside from satisfying Marine Corps Training Information Management System requirements and inspection checklists. We need to lower some of the administrative barriers to completion.

Education, not training, has to be the foundation to change culture and implement effects. Marines enter the Marine Corps from a vastly wide, despondent, and diverse population with

varying pre-conceived biases, education levels, beliefs, ethics, morals, and cultures. Through entry-level training that population is transformed from civilians to Marines, and they are entered into a new culture. If in entry-level training we educate Marines on resources needed, combat stigmas, and put an emphasis on you need to be right in your personal life to be effective in an operational environment, it would at the very least set some of the foundational framework to start building better Marines and citizens. That foundation is essential because then in follow on training, Marines will learn how to be operationally effective with the foundational mindset that leadership will support them and that there is a level of self-responsibility. The goal is to achieve Marines that are consistently ready to deploy holistically vice simply based on readiness metrics. Our policies are geared towards the bottom ten percent and the lowest common denominators; when in reality, it should be focused on the majority of the population to achieve the greatest effects. We find it abhorrent that policy exists because a small percentage of individuals failed to uphold their oath and responsibility. We should not have to ask for trust when trust has not been lost. For example, a company commander is able to take control of a \$3.5 Million U.S. Dollar Consolidated Memorandum Receipt with minimal coordination but to supervise and certify a PFT/CFT the individual needs to attend online training and tested prior to being appointed. There is seemingly no logic in the dichotomy that exists. Foundational education that is then guided with intermittent engaged discussions will ultimately lead to a more resilient force, which is more likely to understand personal ownership and then allows the Marine Corps to focus on being more competitive.

Paul J. Zak, PhD, published a study in 2017 about the neuroscience of trust.<sup>9</sup> In his study, he concluded that employees are more productive and innovative in organizations where there are high amounts of trust.

My team found that those working in companies in the highest quartile of trust, compared to those in the low-

est quartile, had 106 percent more energy at work, were 76 percent more engaged, and said they were 50 percent more productive. High-trust companies had half the employee turnover of low-trust companies, with employees at these companies telling us that they enjoyed their jobs 60 percent more.<sup>10</sup>

Our current system does not trust our leaders to oversee and carry out training in ways that are best suited for their particular units. With the current practice and the scrutiny received to monitor training statistics at a low level, subordinate leaders are pressured to “just get the job done.” They do not feel personally responsible for qualitative results, only quantitative ones. If we truly want to see change in our organization, we must change our incentive structure. As it stands, our small unit leaders are focused on meeting metrics, not developing better Marines and people. We must invest in our small unit leaders by trusting them and letting them take ownership of their Marines. Their objective should not be to achieve 100 percent training but to create highly-functioning, well-rounded Marines and units. Leadership is personal; it requires constant energy and effort to be effective. Technology is a fantastic tool that when properly used, increases productivity but when this tool is overused to solve problems—leadership can become complacent, focusing on process requirements vice individual needs. The argument is that there are ways to do both. There are, and it requires a lot of personal sacrifice to ensure everything is compliant. Leadership requires constant energy and effort. The implementation is largely just lip-service to meet requirements instead of focused efforts to better individuals. The requirements have become so cumbersome that operational training is being sacrificed. We believe that if the approach to administrative training was changed to show trust in junior leadership and in ways that are creative, as a force we would see positive results in both operational preparedness and personal resiliency.

### Conclusion

Our concept of readiness is flawed; it should not be measured in turning red

boxes to green boxes. The antiquated, overly bureaucratic and draconian practices that have become standard need to end. Although our Marine Corps Training Information Management System metrics may statistically show that a unit is prepared our performance may vary. We, as a whole, are sabotaging ourselves if we allow this standard to continue. The amount of effort that is expended in ensuring that annual administrative training requirements are met come at the detriment of training that more adequately prepare Marines for actual operations. With the practices that are currently accepted and the requirements levied against units, we are indeed sabotaging ourselves. Trust is essential in decentralization and if we, as a warfighting organization, do not inherently trust a staff sergeant to be honest during a PFT or CFT scoring how are we ever going to trust them to execute commanders' guidance during operational conflicts. Admittedly, there are likely realities that we are unaware of, political pressure, legal requirements, etc, but if that is the reality then we still need to determine alternate solutions to meet those requirements and still improve the overall pedagogy of annual training.

The purpose of this article is not to bash our current system but to promote a different perspective. Our tendency to get wrapped up in reporting metrics instead of developing Marines has stripped responsibility and ownership from our first-line leaders. Without any personal buy-in, these leaders are not incentivized to go beyond minimum expectations when it comes to informing and training Marines on serious administrative and personal issues—*get the roster signed so that we can report 100 percent completion*. In a perfect world, leaders at all levels would be free to direct all of their focus on operational training intended to increase expeditionary readiness, lethality, and PMOS/BMOS proficiency while also engaging with their Marines to ensure that administrative and personal issues are promptly identified and solved. From the start in entry-level training forward, Marines are educated on and engaged in handling administrative, social, health,

and other miscellaneous topics. Individual leaders feel empowered to own their respective units and do not need to be directed to have common-sense two-way conversations with their Marines. *MCO 1500.63* is re-written to provide even broader guidance and states which topics need to be covered on a yearly basis (nutrition, sexual assault, prohibited activities and conduct, diversity, OPSEC, cybersecurity, alcohol, suicide, etc.). The mindset at the lower level needs to refocus on the priorities, focus on effective training, and not simply the metric. Ensure those leaders understand the intent and are then given access to a plethora of academic resources, discussion guides, vignettes, statistics, videos, case studies, TDGs, and yes, even PowerPoints. Then empower junior leaders to accomplish the administrative requirements through flexible and non-standard ways that can be incorporated into white-space during operationally necessary training. We will never be able to compete or fight now if a primary focus is reactive and adhering to prescriptive restrictions for annual training. These resources can be used to implement training in whatever means that leaders feel are effective for their Marines. The current process for this type of training is overriding the intent; has any Marine ever quit smoking because some virtual gunnery sergeant on a *MarineNet* class asked us to? For the training to really matter, to be effective, grant the individuals that can make it effective the leeway to do so. Our metric cannot be a signed piece of paper with illegible signatures on it. The prescriptive requirements only restrict the effectiveness of the desired end state and are a detriment towards other objectives. We are never going to overcome some of the stigmas and issues we have by creating more requirements. Let us embody what we preach: NCOs as the backbone of the Marine Corps, training at the lowest level, inspect what we expect.

Notes

1. Office of Strategic Service, *Field Manual no. 3: Simple Sabotage Field Manual*, (Washington, DC: January 1944).

2. Leonard Wong, *Stifled Innovation? Developing Tomorrow's Leaders Today*, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002).

3. Gen David H. Berger, "Opinion: To compete with China and Russia, the U.S. Military Must Redefine 'Readiness,'" *Washington Post*, (February 2021), available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.

4. Sisyphus, in Greek Mythology, was the king of Ephyra. He was punished by the gods for his self-aggrandizing by being forced to roll a boulder up a hill only for the boulder to roll back down to the bottom of the hill. He had to do this for eternity. Sisyphian denotes a task that can never be completed.

5. Simon Jackson, "Seven-Steps to Set Goals and Pick Metrics For Customers," *Towards Data Science*, (February 2019), available at <https://towardsdatascience.com>.

6. Peter Grey, "As Children's Freedom Has Declined, So Has their Creativity," *Psychology Today*, (September 2012), available at <https://www.psychologytoday.com>.

7. Kyung Hee Kim, "The Creativity Crisis: The Decrease in Creative Thinking Scores on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking," *Creativity Research Journal*, (Milton Park: Routledge, 2011); and "As Children's Freedom Has Declined, So Has their Creativity."

8. Teresa Amabile, "How to Kill Creativity," *Harvard Business Review*, (October 1998), available at <https://hbr.org>.

9. Paul Zak, "The Neuroscience of Trust: Why it Matters for Teams and Organizations," *Society of Consulting Psychology*, (July 2020), available at <https://www.societyofconsultingpsychology.org>.

10. Ibid.

