

Charismatic Leadership Covered Failures

By Col. Charles Allen
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A few years ago, I heard a senior Army officer lament that the then-Army chief of staff had to deal with congressional inquiries on sexual assault and sexual harassment. The concern was that the chief had more important issues to address, whereas sexual assault prevention was a distractor.

I've also heard of military folks contesting or disputing the statistics, estimates and findings of studies addressing Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention.

Likewise, some commanding officers and other leaders will contend that such bad behavior occurs in other units and organizations—not in their own, of course. I'd like to share my story to show that while leaders may be satisfied with organizational performance, it is important to pay attention to the climate experienced by service members and civilians.

In the late 1990s, I assumed command of an Army garrison in Europe. The base support battalion was responsible for enabling the missions of its operational units and tenant organizations, and caring for soldiers, civilians and their family members, as well as military retirees in the surrounding communities. As a field artillery officer, I sought to learn about the supported activities and our German hosts. It was a steep learning curve.

My focus was outside the base support battalion as an organizational unit as I embarked on the

90-day assessment. I felt fortunate to have a strong operations section, composed of soldiers and civilian employees, which had a reputation for solid planning, coordination and execution of community-support missions. The section was led by an officer who ran a tight ship, and when I ventured into his offices on the opposite side of headquarters, the staff was always focused and hard at work. I was glad that this was one of the areas I didn't have to worry about.

Trouble Arises

One evening, my wife prompted me to talk to the personnel NCO. She wouldn't say why or what it was about. I had the good sense to take her cue. The NCO did not feel she could approach me directly, but trusted my wife to do so. When we met, the NCO expressed concern about a civilian employee in the operations section, and how she was being treated by the operations officer.

After a series of initial inquiries and a formal Army Regulation (AR) 15-6 fact-finding investigation, we discovered an inappropriate relationship and hostile work environment within the operations shop, as well as conduct unbecoming an officer since the operations officer was engaged in outside activities.

The AR 15-6 investigation also revealed a pattern of behavior, to include sexual misconduct, that extended across prior assignments. It seems that because he was a "good, sharp officer who got things done" and was well-liked, he was allowed

to move on to the next unit and the next series of victims.

Just Down the Hall

The operations officer's actions took place just down the hall from my office, and I was unaware of them. In hindsight, it was clear that the operations staff of officers, NCOs and civilians felt trapped within the climate and dared not say anything because of the favored status of the officer.

I did not know who or whether anyone else in the headquarters knew about the hostile work environment or the misconduct. Perhaps the climate felt by unit members perceived the leader (me, as well as my predecessor) focused more on what got done rather than how things got done.

More than 20 years later, I still ask myself a series of questions I think will also be posed by U.S. Army War College students during our seminar discussions and by Army leaders (uniformed and civilian) in myriad operational and institutional organizations. The most important question may be, "What, if anything, has changed over the past two decades?"

A friend and colleague offered another. "What role will [Army War College graduates] play in creating the environment and climate to create the trust necessary to be more aware and ensure proper actions to hold predators, bad actors [and ourselves] accountable?"

It may be that the discourse of addressing these questions will be more relevant than the answers. ★

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