

What I Have Learned About Trainee Abuse

It did not take me long to realize that the biggest challenge regarding trainee abuse would be the establishment of an uncompromising standard of drill sergeant conduct that did not stifle the drill sergeants' enthusiasm to actively engage the privates in a tough (not "mean") manner. The major lesson I learned regarding this issue during my two years in command (I'm sure this comes as no surprise to most leaders) is that the command climate you foster has a significant influence on drill sergeant behavior. I focused on three primary areas to establish a command climate that would engender professional behavior by the cadre: information flow, firm yet fair punishment, and command presence.

To ensure everyone clearly understood not only the published standards, but also my intent, I personally met in my office with each new member of the battalion down to the PV2 armorer. During this initial in-briefing I tried to arm them with some tools that might help them avoid trainee abuse issues. The key points (some of which I stole from others) I covered when speaking to drill sergeants about this topic included:

- I'm glad to have you join our team.
- I'm proud of you for the sacrifices you have made and will make in the future.
- Ensure you have read TRADOC Regulation 350-6 cover-to-cover (I did not want anyone to use ignorance as an excuse for doing something wrong).
- Do not view TRADOC Regulation 350-6 as a straight jacket.
- I want you to be tough on the soldiers, but I know you can figure out how to discipline a private without verbally or physically abusing him--there are hundreds of other options.
- Ensure you have a good "battle buddy" relationship with other drill sergeants. You may save someone's career, or someone may save yours.
- It is your duty to take appropriate action when you witness trainee abuse. If you do not, you are just as guilty as the offender. Your loyalty to the NCO Corps and to the drill sergeant badge must take precedence over your loyalty to your battle buddy in these circumstances.
- Make the decision now, before the situation arises, regarding how you will respond to a private who makes sexual advances towards you. If you have to "think about it" at the time, it is probably too late.
- You will never fall off the cliff if you don't walk up to the edge (stay out of the gray area!)
- Before you engage in an improper relationship with a trainee, ask yourself: "Is it worth my career?" "Is it worth losing my family?" The answer will always be "NO."
- You may be able to keep a secret, but the private cannot.
- Be concerned if you find yourself feeling more comfortable at the barracks than you do at home.
- While you're not going to get "burned" for an errant swear word, do not expect any mercy if you have an improper relationship with a trainee.
- Remember that your soldiers will never forget you, for better or worse. If you betray the Army Values, it will affect the privates for a lifetime.

- The American people have entrusted you with its greatest treasure--don't abuse this sacred responsibility.
- Be tough, be safe, be smart.

I tried to make this a very positive meeting, making a concerted effort not to threaten the drill sergeants. I wanted them to understand that I had confidence they would do the right thing. I expected them to engage the privates and enforce the standards. The last thing I wanted was for them to constantly be "looking over their shoulders" as they executed their duties. I think this personal dialog accomplished a very important objective: it ensured everyone in the battalion knew exactly what the standard was and what my expectations were. This avoided the possibility that a company cadre could create their own "culture" based on their own interpretation of what the regulations stated.

While the initial orientation laid the foundation for cadre behavior, I was amazed at how often I had to repeat myself regarding different issues, particularly language. I took frequent opportunities during venues such as battalion awards ceremonies and NCOs to remind drill sergeants that profane and obscene language was a "no-go." I even gave them a list of words that were absolutely "off-limits" in the presence of trainees to reduce the "gray area" for them. I truly believe the more I reinforced the standards, the better they were carried out.

The way trainee abuse allegations were handled also contributed to a positive command climate. There was absolutely no favoritism shown; once the allegation was determined to be credible it was thoroughly investigated. Each case was judged individually, without any predetermined punishment for a particular offense. In most cases where it was the drill sergeant's first offense (with the exception improper relationships/sexual misconduct), the drill sergeant was given a punishment that got his attention but did not ruin his career. During the administration of the punishment, I made it clear to the individual that the infraction was wrong but expressed confidence that it was an aberration and would not reoccur. I also did not publicize the details of most minor incidents. I knew the word would "get around" regarding what happened and how it was handled, and I think the drill sergeants appreciated not being publicly embarrassed and also being given a clean slate.

In situations of sexual misconduct, my approach was different. Once I determined that the allegation was founded, punishment was swift and severe. I wanted to ensure everyone knew that a drill sergeant who used his power to establish an improper relationship did not deserve, nor would he be given a second chance.

Command presence was a third method we used to deter trainee abuse. Although I'm convinced that if a drill sergeant wants to do something wrong, he will find a way to do it, active command presence certainly works to limit those opportunities. My CSM, XO and I inspected the barracks at odd hours of the day or night, and we executed the brigade policy which called for a company Top 3 representative from each battalion, accompanied by a female SDNCO, to inspect all of the unit's companies every night. Robust command presence actually identified trainee abuse incidents on more than one occasion. For example, during a 0430 formation prior to a foot march, I witnessed a drill sergeant slap a private's Kevlar so hard that the private almost fell over. Had I not been there to see it, the offense may never have been dealt with properly.

In conclusion, the prevention of trainee abuse, especially in a gender- integrated environment, is an important element of being a successful IET commander. The challenge is developing a command climate that deters misconduct without diminishing the drill sergeant's performance or prematurely questioning his integrity.

Some Other Things New IET leaders Should Know

- Some investigations take up a considerable amount of time. I often appointed my XO as the IO for serious cases. A couple times he was out of the net (off and on) for up to a week. The workload gets especially large when there are numerous witnesses to an allegation.
- The good news is the trainees get a pretty good indoctrination into the regulations governing trainee abuse. Almost all of the allegations I dealt with originated with a private having enough courage to speak out.
- Holdovers tend to be involved in DS sexual misconduct cases more often than privates still in training. The reason for this is obvious. They spend an inordinate amount of time in situations where DSs can get to know them better than the average private. The problem, at least at my installation, is there is no place for privates on profile to go. The company must hold these privates until they have fully recovered. They are often used by the training NCO or drill sergeants for administrative tasks, which puts them in locations (drill sergeant's office) where they are less visible to other cadre or other privates. The longer a holdover stays in the company, the greater the chances that a personal relationship between him/her and a cadre member will develop.
- Third year DSs, at least in my unit, were involved in more improper relationship-type incidents than DSs serving a two year tour. Ensure your decision to allow a DS to extend for a third year is very well thought-out.
- It is impossible to predict who will commit trainee abuse. I've been surprised too many times to even try to figure out who will be the next one to make such a tragic mistake.
- Some privates and a few drill sergeants will lie to stay out of trouble. One of the quickest ways to figure out if someone is being truthful is to offer a polygraph (in most cases you won't actually administer it). If the person refuses or even hesitates when asked the question, there's a good chance he/she is not telling the truth.