



February 2010

The military has a language all its own, and in the Army, we have our own distinct dialect. Over the past few years, we've adopted several new catchphrases to describe changes in the way we do business. Among the most popular of these expressions is "transformation" and "culture change," concepts we've applied to Army safety as well. Since these terms may mean different things to different people, I'd like to share with you my ideas regarding "safety culture."

Within our Army, there is a unique culture built upon common core values and shared historical traditions that transcend branch or MOS. But when you look at units individually, other distinct cultures become apparent. For example, infantry units have a culture different from armor units, and within aviation, unit culture can vary with aircraft type. These diverse cultures are a good thing; camaraderie is strengthened through shared experiences and mutual understanding.

The great thing about safety is it's relevant in any culture. Unfortunately, however, safety has often been treated as a regulatory requirement rather than a flexible process adapted to a unit's unique needs. Making safety a fundamental value that's part of every culture will require changing the way we think about it, moving from a compliance-based mindset to one focused on creativity and active Soldier participation.

How do we go about making this transformation? Leaders can start by identifying the strengths, limitations and resources of their individual units. The next step is to take our Army's existing safety programs, messaging and tools and tailor them to the unit's culture. We've learned there is no one-size fits-all "cure" for the safety issues we see most often, things like seat belt use and speed in privately owned vehicles. Instead, our programs must be driven by conditions within the unit itself. Factors such as average Soldier age, unit OPTEMPO, deployment schedules and various other issues must be taken into account as Leaders develop safety programs targeted to their unit's needs.

Even the greatest safety program won't be effective if it isn't put into practice every day with buy-in from Soldiers at all levels. Change has to come from the top and bottom simultaneously, with both Leaders and subordinates participating in the process. The end goal is to have a culture where every individual is an active owner of their personal safety and the composite risk management process. This step is perhaps the most difficult, but it also pays the greatest rewards in protecting our vast Band of Brothers and Sisters.

The transformation to a culture that embraces safety doesn't stop at the unit or Soldier level — our Families should be involved in the process as well. Families are the source of strength for most of our Soldiers, and their inclusion in the safety culture is critical to our success. Soldiers who are continuously exposed to cultures that embrace safety, both at home and at work, will be well equipped to face the challenges unique to Army life.

Eventually, culture becomes part of who you are, and that's what we want to happen with safety. We want our Soldiers to carry safety with them wherever they are and whatever they're doing, be it on duty in theater or off duty at home. Ultimately, the key to culture change is engagement across all levels of command, among Soldiers and within the intimate bonds of Family.

The USACR/Safety Center team stands ready to help you build safety into your unit's culture, and I ask you to share your thoughts on the subject with us. Our Army is the finest in the world due to its diversity in people and missions, but we can all take pride in the common cause of protecting our Band of Brothers and Sisters. Thank you for all you do every day to keep our Soldiers, Families and Civilians safe.

Army Safe is Army Strong!

William T. Wolf
Brigadier General, USA
Commanding