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Exceptional frontline performance: Learning from the Medal of Honor tradition[☆]



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Pay, promotion, and perquisites are used by most organizations to define organizational goals and motivate employee performance to achieve them. When designed well, incentive systems can be effective in motivating and directing behavior for the vast majority of circumstances in which employees find themselves. Whether the situation involves day-to-day conduct, work quality standards, or even conflicts of interest, employees generally know what is expected.

However, at moments of great uncertainty and high stakes, standard incentive systems may provide little motivation or guidance. The rewards of normal times may even discourage the personally risky actions that may be required at abnormal moments. Such actions may also run counter to the risk-avoidance that conventional incentives can foster among frontline employees where personal discretion is often discouraged.

Still, these low-probability but high-consequence moments can present employees with unexpected opportunities for actions that may have great impact on the organization. Consider, for example, a waiter at a large and crowded restaurant whose superiors underappreciated a nascent fire in a nearby room. Should he warn the guests on his own to vacate the building? That could be a personally risky but very important action. If he counseled patrons to leave unnecessarily, he ran the hazard of creating panic, possibly causing injury, opening his employer to liability and himself to dismissal. However, if he failed on behalf of the restaurant to warn its customers about a potentially life-threatening development, he put their lives and the restaurant itself at risk. For a few critical moments, that frontline employee carried the weight of

the organization and the fate of its customers on his shoulders.

Moments of such extremes are rare. Most employees will complete their entire work careers without ever facing one, and many organizations will never experience such a juncture. But when they do occur, employee readiness can be essential, as we will see in the case of a Federal Reserve employee who had to decide without legal counsel on 9/11 whether to radically intervene in the marketplace; a mid-level financial analyst for a large investment company who developed grave doubts about a touted financial package of sub-prime mortgages; and a lifeguard called to abandon his station to save a swimmer off a nearby beach.

We suggest in this article that one way for organizations to prepare employees for low-probability, high-impact events is to publicly recognize individuals who have acted exceptionally and courageously in the face of extreme risk and uncertainty in the past. This can provide employees with indelible roadmaps for facing crisis moments of their own and motivate and guide them to act on behalf of the organization's ultimate goals in ways that standard incentive systems cannot.

The U.S. military has responded over two centuries to this organizational challenge by building a formal system for recognizing frontline valor with the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military award, and then incorporating accounts of recipient actions into leadership development at all levels. We believe that the institution of the Medal of Honor, and the training traditions that surround it, offer important lessons for non-military organizations in how to inspire and guide exceptional performance in frontline employees when they face moments of grave risk and high uncertainty.

THE MEDAL OF HONOR TRADITION

The Medal of Honor has come to play a significant role in the armed services for preparing the next generation of personnel

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for exceptional performance. Gripping accounts of extraordinary action — encapsulated in the official citation to a recipient's combat valor — are layered into training for officers and non-officers alike, tangibly informing them of what will be expected of them in combat.

To identify how the Medal of Honor has served of instructional value, we have examined its tradition through a host of primary sources. We have interviewed Medal of Honor recipients and others directly familiar with the tradition; witnessed bestowal of a Medal of Honor at the White House and recognition of a recipient at the Pentagon; interviewed and observed those who are training future members of the armed forces or being trained themselves; examined a range of memorials to Medal of Honor recipients in military training facilities; and personally experienced a training course that places Medal of Honor recipients at the center of its curriculum.

Through these several research paths we have sought to identify how the extraordinary actions recognized by the Medal of Honor become compelling instants for preparing others for actions above and beyond their ordinary duties — and how analogous practices can be created in organizations far beyond the armed forces.

COMPELLING ACCOUNTS FOR OFFICER CANDIDATES

We start with brief examination of a training course for officer candidates at the Marine Corps base near Quantico, Virginia, where Medal of Honor accounts are brought vividly to life for the Corps' future leaders.

A platoon of aspirants, identical in their drab, sweat-stained t-shirts and camouflage trousers arrive panting at a clearing in the dense woods. They come to attention, standing silently as their instructor commands one candidate to step forward to read the citation on the metal plaque nailed to a tree.

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving in Kunar Province, Afghanistan" the citation begins. The plaque is one of 15 scattered across a challenging five-mile course, each telling a story of a Marine or sailor who earned the Medal of Honor. This final plaque offers an account of Corporal Dakota Meyer, who returned again and again in a firefight to retrieve dead and wounded comrades and allied Afghan soldiers.

"Corporal Meyer's daring initiative and bold fighting spirit throughout the six-hour battle significantly disrupted the enemy's attack and inspired the members of the combined force to fight on," recites the officer candidate. After the reverent reading, the candidates drop to the ground to pump out 10 rapid-fire push-ups, then jog off to complete the course.

Marine instructors know that their officers in training have heard the story of Dakota Meyer before, how he persevered in his rescue raids even after sustaining a shrapnel injury. But by retelling this story as perspiration trickles down the candidates' backs, Marine instructors seek to imprint a compelling account of extraordinary action deeply into the consciousness of their second lieutenants-in-the-making.

"Medal of Honor recipients are the supreme standard of servant leadership," explained Colonel Kris Stillings, former

commanding officer of the Marines' Officer Candidates School, the 10-week training and evaluation course that selects the next generation of commissioned officers. "Those are the kind of leaders we want to create in the Marine Corps."

A "CRYSTALLIZING MOMENT" FOR ENLISTED MARINES

Thousands of miles to the West in the hills of Southern California, Marine enlisted recruits are slogging through Camp Pendleton's "Crucible," a 54-hour rite-of-passage that tests the recruits in the 11th of their 12 weeks of training. If they successfully master its 24 grueling stations, they earn the right to call themselves Marines. Woven deeply into this experience are dramatic accounts, drawn from Medal of Honor and other award citations, of how other young Marines faced a crisis and acted courageously.

The Crucible stations are named after decorated Marines — 17 Medal of Honor recipients among them — "to help to inspire them and give them the motivation to see what these Marines did in combat to push through and complete their mission," explained Major Rory Nichols, Operations Officer for the recruitment course in San Diego.

At each station, recruits stand at attention as the drill instructor reads the official citation. Then they are briefed on the tactical situation involving a fictional insurgent force and given their mission, which requires exceptional action to complete. At the station honoring Medal of Honor recipient Jimmie E. Howard, for example, they hear how this staff sergeant coordinated the defense of an outpost of Marines in the face of an overwhelming force of North Vietnamese soldiers. The recruits then launch into a combat exercise against an opposing force of their own.

"The Crucible is intended to be the culminating event, that crystallizing moment of becoming a Marine," explained Nichols. "It is intended to replicate some of the hardships that our future Marines will face in combat. No one is shooting at them, but they are pushed beyond their perceived limits."

For Private First Class Coleman Branson, the first few citations read by his drill instructor during The Crucible failed to captivate him. "But as we got deeper into The Crucible and got to the citations from Iraq and Afghanistan," he said, "things that happened in our lifetime — the stories really came to life."

Branson singled out the station honoring Corporal Jason Dunham, who died after throwing himself on a grenade while on patrol in Husaybah, Iraq. "Just a few years ago, Corporal Dunham was in the exact same place as we were, going through the exact same training. That started to change the way I looked at things. As you get fatigued, and your legs hurt, you think: 'I bet he felt that way, but even more, and he went into combat and jumped on a grenade for his fellow Marines. If he can do that, then I can do this.'"

As Branson's comments suggest, the Crucible experience creates a psychological tie between the new Marine candidate and the serving Marine who had acted courageously. By identifying with the award recipient, the new Marine can imagine himself or herself in a similar situation. The new Marine has also acquired a mental model of how to act in such a situation, when his or her own life may be on the line.

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