

HIGH PERFORMING UNITS

Many times over the past two years, the Commanding General of TRADOC, General Starry, has highlighted the need for "high performance crews in well trained high performing units." He has called such units the greatest contributing factor to relative combat power. The relative value and relationships of these factors have been expressed as:

TECHNOLOGY = 3-5%

HIGH PERFORMANCE CREWS = 12-15%

HIGH PERFORMANCE CREWS IN HIGH PERFORMANCE UNITS = 25%

The performance differential between high performance and other units has been documented throughout history. Vivid historical examples of units in combat portray examples of unit performance far superior to performances of similar units. Examples like the 101 Airborne Division at the Battle of the Bulge and the British defeat of the Spanish Armada. There are more mundane examples of high performing systems such as athletic teams, successful corporations and symphony orchestras.

What is the nature of these high performing systems? How do we create them and how can we recognize them? Commanders responsible for unit performance need answers to these questions.

Many times a day commanders of Army units ask themselves, "Am I commanding in such a way as to achieve high performance in my unit?" They then answer themselves with a vague, ill-defined "feeling" that things are going right, or -- not so right, and then they change or don't change, accordingly. Or they may rely on traditional indicators such as AGI, ARTEP, SQT and USR results, performance rates such as AWOLs, Court Martial and Article 15s.

Countless studies of units have been conducted to try to define, for the commander, a way to systematically and continuously measure the effectiveness of his unit. These studies have been characterized by a pre-occupation with the component parts of a unit rather than the unit as a whole. The attention of investigators has been on problem finding and problem solving with respect to parts. How much of the richness of the unit, as a whole, AS IT IS, may be missed? Some studies have produced useful insights, but none have defined a valid effectiveness measure.

In a particularly good unit, soldiers FEEL something about the way their unit is operating. WHAT they feel is not as important for understanding the unit, as is the fact that they are feeling it together. General perceptions, therefore, may be more useful and valid for answering the question, than detailed conclusions about the component parts or functions of the unit.

To understand units, particularly high performing ones, we need richer, more vivid accounts of how the unit actually functions rather than descriptions of the behavior of independent and dependent variables. It is the mix and reinforcing quality of these variables that must be understood.

Few, if any commanders have been heard to say, "I can't really measure my effectiveness, therefore, I won't worry about it." On the contrary, commanders push for improved performance levels without a clear awareness of what the real performance levels are or even what levels are possible.

Perhaps the futility of standard research approaches should be recognized and an alternative approach investigated, one that looks at the "flavor" of a unit. One such approach would be to develop a comprehensive list of descriptors of the NATURE of a high performing system. (HPS) Descriptors of a high performing unit (viewed as a system) should have diagnostic and perhaps even prescriptive value. Armed with such a listing, the commander could better define and refine his "feelings" about his unit and react accordingly.

When a group of soldiers operating together in a unit is performing its mission in a way that may be described as "excellent" or "outstanding", what events, characteristics or behavior can be observed in that unit? Though there is no absolute measure of "outstandingness", in a comparative sense, excellent or outstanding means doing significantly better than similar units with similar men and the same mission.

The indicators of high performing systems may provide for commanders and others a better understanding of "outstandingness" and a standard - a target to shoot at, thereby easing the problem of measuring and improving unit performance. Instead of asking himself, "Am I commanding in such a way as to improve my unit?", he may want to check his observations about his unit against the descriptive indicators. The indicators listed here* are not the direct result of empirical research but represent "intuitive leaps". Some overlap and some may seem to contradict. The indicators fall into 6 categories. The first four deal with general characteristics of the HPS, the soldiers and the interaction between the two:

- 1) The unit
- 2) The soldiers
- 3) The interaction between the soldiers and their HPS
- 4) The leadership
- 5) The "US" attitude
- 6) The interface between the soldier and his gear

*These indicators come from a list of 47 hypotheses developed by Peter B. Vaill concerning high performing systems. Many of the ideas, much of the phraseology, and many of the conclusions in this paper come from his article "Toward A Behavioral Description of High-Performing Systems" contained in a book Leadership - Where Else Can We Go? Edited by McCall and Lombardo and published by Duke University Press, Durham, NC in 1978.

THE UNIT

- 1) HPSs WILL EXHIBIT A RHYTHM OF OPERATION THAT IS FELT BY ITS SOLDIERS AND EVIDENT TO OBSERVERS. PHRASES TO DESCRIBE THIS RHYTHM LIKE "THEY REALLY HAVE IT TOGETHER" OR "THEY CAN'T DO ANY THING WRONG" WILL BE COMMON. The general phenomenon to which these phrases refer is that improved operations are produced with substantially less effort than before the rhythm was achieved. Athletic teams commonly display this rhythm even if for short periods of time. Behind 24-0, the USC Trojans scored 55 points in 17 minutes in a 1974 football game. Infantry squads undergoing the Forced March-Live fire event in the ARTEP often display this rhythm.
- 2) THERE WILL BE A GREAT DEAL OF EXPERIMENTATION AND REHEARSAL IN A HPS. VARIOUS WAYS OF OPERATING WILL BE TRIED WITH ONLY TEMPORARY FIXATION ON "THE ONE BEST WAY TO DO IT."
- 3) THERE WILL BE A CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF SHIFTING AROUND OF VARIOUS MANUAL AND MENTAL ACTIVITIES WITHIN A HPS. NO ONE KIND OF BEHAVIOR WILL DOMINATE. HPSs continuously reevaluate their operational methods. They don't stagnate or rest on past performance. They are extremely innovative and creative.
- 4) A HPS WILL NOT HAVE A CLEAR OFF/ON CHARACTER. ITS SOLDIERS MAY REGARD IT AS ON WHEN IT SEEMS OFF TO OBSERVERS AND VICE VERSA.
- 5) SOLDIERS OF A HPS WILL ATTEMPT TO "ARRANGE THE ENVIRONMENT" WITHIN WHICH AN ACTIVITY IS GOING TO OCCUR. THINGS HAVE TO BE "JUST RIGHT." The importance of timing will be well understood.
- 6) THERE WILL BE A LOT OF UNOBSERVABLE ACTIVITY WITHIN A HPS AND ONLY THE MOST PROMINENT ACTIONS WILL BE EVIDENT. This indicator relates to 2 & 3. Internally HPS are characterized by continuous and frantic activity the purpose of which is to ensure that whatever the product of the unit may be, it is the best possible. This activity is low key to outsiders but very important to the soldiers of a HPS.
- 7) HPSs WILL EXCITE CURIOSITY ABOUT ITS HIDDEN ACTIVITY. THEY WILL DEVELOP PROTAGONISTS WHO WILL PLAY IMPORTANT ROLES IN THE UNIT'S INTERFACE WITH HIGHER AND ADJACENT UNITS. A HPS will develop a reputation (See #1) as a winner. Close association to that unit will develop among higher headquarters staff officers and possibly commanders. They will become personally involved in the HPS's well-being and champion the HPS at every opportunity.
- 8) FOR MOST SOLDIERS IN A HPS, THE OUTCOME OF AN EFFORT MAY NOT BE AS IMPORTANT TO THEM AS THE TASK ITSELF. TO THEM, THE VALUE OF THE TASK IS IN THE DOING OF IT.

9) WHEN A NEW SOLDIER JOINS A HPS AND AFTER BECOMING A CONTRIBUTOR, HE WILL THEN AT SOME LATER POINT "TURN PRO." In a HPS, newcomers will not automatically be accepted. They have to earn their stripes. There will always be a small disfunctional group composed of those who were not accepted.

10) SOLDIERS IN A HPS EXHIBIT REFLEX BEHAVIOR TO THE DEGREE THAT THEY LATER CANNOT ACCOUNT FOR HOW OR WHY THEY ACTED IN A PARTICULAR WAY.

11) UNSUSPECTED TALENTS WILL EMERGE IN SOLDIERS WHO BECOME PART OF A HPS. Informal leaders will emerge and be accepted by other soldiers of a HPS. Conflict between informal and the formal chain of command leaders will not be evident even though the informal leader may be dominant. Each soldier of a HPS is given much latitude in seeking and occupying the particular position for which he is best suited. This internal, informal arrangement of positions and functions may not be evident even to the higher chain of command.

THE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE SOLDIERS AND THEIR HPS

12) SOLDIERS OF A HPS APPARENTLY "LIVE, EAT, SLEEP, BREATHE, AND FIGHT ABOUT" THEIR UNIT. This perception on the part of observers is an important clue that the unit to which the soldiers belong is a HPS.

13) SOLDIERS OF A HPS ARE AESTHETICALLY MOTIVATED TO SEEK CONTINUED EXPERIENCES IN THE HPS. This kind of motivation will be relatively incomprehensible to observers and they may regard these soldiers as "weird". This indicator relates to #8.

14) SOLDIERS WILL FEEL "PEAK EXPERIENCES" IN THEIR UNIT AND WILL DEMONSTRATE UNUSUAL ENTHUSIASM.

15) PERFORMANCE BREAKTHROUGHS WILL OCCUR IN UNPLANNED WAYS. SOLDIERS WILL ACCOUNT FOR THE EVENT IN RELATIVELY NON-OPERATIONAL TERMS SUCH AS "WE FINALLY GOT IT ALL TOGETHER".

16) WHEN PERFORMANCE OF A HPS DECLINES, ITS SOLDIERS WILL BECOME GREATLY AGITATED AND UPSET. The consequences of failure will seem to observers to be greatly magnified and it will appear that the soldiers "take things too seriously".

17) SOLDIERS OF A HPS WILL TALK ABOUT AND DEVELOP SCENARIOS OF DESIRABLE STATES FOR THE HPS. A considerable amount of apparently meaningless behavior can be explained as attempts to live these scenarios. The function of all such attempts seems to be to prepare soldiers to participate in the unit's operation and to sustain them through its difficulties.

18) PASSAGE OF TIME WILL BE MEASURED BY UNIT ACTIVITIES AND PERFORMANCE. Instead of saying "next month" soldiers will say "after the ARTEP" or "the week before the river crossing".

19) BOREDOM WILL TEND TO BE ABSENT.

20) SOCIAL AND OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN A HPS WILL TEND TO BE COMBINED TO A MUCH GREATER EXTENT THAN IN NON-HPSs. Informal meetings will often occur at officers and NCO clubs. There will be a lot of "talking shop".

21) SOLDIERS IN A HPS WILL EXHIBIT A CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE HISTORY, TRADITION AND LORE OF THEIR UNIT. A "HALL OF FAME" PHENOMENON ASSOCIATED WITH ASSIGNMENT TO THE HPS WILL ARISE. This may not be expressed in the traditional sense. "History" may not mean what the unit did in World War II but rather what Cpl Ledbetter did on last weeks river crossing. The unit crest becomes important not because it represents a famous fighting unit but because it is a symbol common to soldiers who are sharing a satisfying, rewarding experience in the present. Myths will develop about recent historical soldiers of the unit.

THE LEADERSHIP

22) LEADERSHIP BY EXAMPLE WILL BE FOUND IN HPSs, SOLDIERS WILL LOOK AT THEIR LEADERS AS "PACESETTERS."

23) LEADERS IN HPSs WILL NOT BE LOOKED AT BY THE SOLDIERS AS GENERALISTS WHO NO LONGER ARE FULLY EXPERT IN THE BASIC FUNCTIONS OF THE UNIT. A LEADER'S INITIAL STATUS, INFLUENCE, CREDIBILITY AND PRESTIGE WILL COME FROM THE DEMONSTRATION OF EXPERTISE.

24) AFTER AN EXTENDED PERIOD, LEADERS OF HPSs WILL BE "PUT ON A PEDESTAL" AND WILL EMBODY THE MEANING OF THE OPERATIONS THAT THE HPS PERFORMS. A leader's personal charisma in a HPS is composed of two elements, his own personal style and "unit charisma" which he embodies as the units' symbol of excellence. Fantastic capabilities will be associated with the leaders of a HPS and failure to live up to them might be devastating. The "pacesetting" function is important to the soldiers as it reaffirms the leader's capabilities. Soldiers will be heard saying "The only guy that can do it better than I is the old man".

THE "US" ATTITUDE

THE FOLLOWING OBSERVATIONS DEAL WITH THE COHESIVE NATURE OF A HPS. A FRATERNAL OR "US" ATTITUDE IS DEVELOPED BY ITS SOLDIERS. IN GENERAL, HPSs CONSIDER THEMSELVES "ABOVE" SIMILAR UNITS TO THE EXTENT THAT CONVENTIONAL RESTRAINTS, RULES AND NORMAL OPERATING PROCEDURES ARE, TO VARYING DEGREES, MODIFIED OR DISREGARDED. OUTSIDE INFLUENCE IS NEITHER SOLICITED NOR WELCOMED. A HPS TENDS TO BE VERY "PRIVATE" AND PROTECTIVE OF ITS SOLDIERS AND PREROGATIVES. THE SPIRIT OF "US" OR "WE" TRANSCENDS FEELINGS OF "ME" AND "I" TO THE EXTENT THAT SOLDIERS SAY "WE" WHEN THEY MEAN "I".

25) THERE WILL ALWAYS BE DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN "WHAT THE BOOK SAYS" AND WHAT THE HPS ACTUALLY DOES. CIRCUMVENTION OF THE RULES TENDS TO BE OVERT AND NONAPOLOGETIC. This is a reflection of the competence and confidence within a HPS. The protagonist mentioned in #7 will assist in any difficulties that may arise as a result.

- 26) EXTERNAL CONTROL ON A HPS'S OPERATIONS ARE VIEWED BY ITS SOLDIERS AS AT BEST IRRELEVANT AND AT WORSE AS POSITIVE IMPEDIMENTS TO PERFORMANCE.
- 27) HPSs WILL TEND TO EVOLVE VARIOUS SOPs FOR DEALING WITH HIGHER AND ADJACENT HEADQUARTERS AND TO LIMIT THIS FUNCTION TO "ADVANCE MEN" WHO ARE EXPERT IN THESE RELATIONSHIPS.
- 28) EFFORTS TO DICTATE PARTICULAR KINDS AND QUALITY OF OUTPUT OF A HPS WILL TEND TO DEPRESS MOTIVATION UNLESS THE RELATIONSHIP WITH HIGHER HEADQUARTERS IS VERY CAREFULLY AND EFFECTIVELY HANDLED.
- 29) INTERNAL UNIT OPERATIONAL NEEDS ARE THE CRITERIA USED BY SOLDIERS OF A HPS TO SEEK RELIEF FROM THE PRESSURES OF PARTICIPATION. EXTERNAL SCHEDULES FOR RELIEF AND BREAKS ARE REGARDED BY SOLDIERS AS INAPPROPRIATE. Relates to #8, 12 & 33.
- 30) REMARKS BY SOLDIERS TO OUTSIDERS ABOUT HOW AND WHY THE HPS OPERATES AS IT DOES WILL TEND TO BE IN TRITE GENERALITIES OR BY SHOWING RATHER THAN TELLING. SOLDIERS WILL OFTEN SAY, "THERE'S NO WAY I CAN EXPLAIN IT TO YOU".
- 31) A PRIVATE LANGUAGE AND SET OF SYMBOLS ARISE AMONG THE SOLDIERS OF A HPS FOR TALKING ABOUT ITS CONDUCT AND PROBLEMS. TO OUTSIDERS, IT MAY BE UNINTELLIGIBLE JARGON.
- 32) SOLDIERS IN A HPS DEVELOP A SET OF UNIT-SPECIFIC INDICATORS OF PERFORMANCE EMBODIED IN A HIGHLY PERSONALIZED CODING SYSTEM THAT MAY NOT RELATE TO OTHER SIMILAR UNITS. This private language facilitates the rapid transmission of information and is a method of preventing information overload. Though its presence distinguishes HPSs from other units, its purpose is functional rather than affective.
- 33) HOURS OF WORK AND INTENSITIES OF EFFORT WILL BE DETERMINED BY THE IMPERATIVES OF A HPS'S OPERATIONS RATHER THAN BY SUPERIOR HEADQUARTERS.
- 34) A SET OF EXPLICIT VALUES ABOUT WHAT THE UNIT DOES AND WHY IT DOES IT WILL ARISE. There will be much introspection and system evaluation covering all aspects of the HPSs operations. This will be continuous and is related to the indicator that expresses the divergence and variation in activities with little fixation on "the one best way".
- 35) THE MEANING OF SOLDIERS' BEHAVIOR AND ACTIVITY WILL BE A FUNCTION OF THE HPSs ACTIVITY RATHER THAN THE STANDARDS OF THE LARGER UNIT.

THE INTERFACE BETWEEN THE SOLDIER AND HIS GEAR

THE SECOND SURPRISING PHENOMENON IS THE APPARENT INTERACTION AND PRE-OCCUPATION OF SOLDIERS IN A HPS WITH THE GEAR (TOOLS, WEAPONS, VEHICLES, RADIOS, ETC) THEY EMPLOY IN THE OPERATIONS OF THE HPS. THIS SPECIAL

ATTACHMENT OF THE SOLDIERS TO THEIR GEAR SHOULD BE ONE OF THE EASIER INDICATORS TO IDENTIFY. THIS PHENOMENON WILL PROBABLY BEGIN TO OCCUR AT THE EARLY STAGES OF HIGH PERFORMANCE.

36) SOLDIERS WILL ADD TO AND ELABORATE UPON THEIR GEAR. THEY WILL INVENT A VARIETY OF HOMEMADE JIGS, PROPS, FIXTURES AND SIGNALLING DEVICES THAT FUNCTION TO IMPROVE THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THEIR GEAR - MAKE THEM WORK BETTER AND LAST LONGER. Field expedients of unusual variety and effectiveness will be commonplace.

37) SOLDIERS MAINTENANCE ON THEIR GEAR IS FREQUENTLY CO-MINGLED WITH PERFORMANCE AND WILL NOT NECESSARILY BE A SEPARATE FUNCTION.

38) SOLDIERS OF A HPS WILL ASCRIBE HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS TO THEIR GEAR. MACHINES BECOME PEOPLE AND GET PERSONAL NICKNAMES. VARIOUS PIECES OF EQUIPMENT WILL BE ASSIGNED A PSYCHOLOGY ALL THEIR OWN TO WHICH THE SOLDIER WILL FEEL HE MUST RELATE.

39) SOLDIERS, THEREFORE, WILL DEVELOP PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THEMSELVES AND THEIR EQUIPMENT.

40) AS A RESULT, SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE PERFORMANCES WILL BE CALLED FORTH FROM THE GEAR OF A HPS; PERFORMANCE NOT ENVISIONED BY ITS DESIGNERS. As an example, two tanks, one with the engine out, the other with the fire control system out, were hooked together to produce one operable system.

The foregoing indicators describe characteristics of HPS which will naturally evolve during the development of a HPS in a healthy organizational climate and with positive leadership. Attempts to artificially create these characteristics (e.g., "Everyone nickname your weapon") will probably be counterproductive. Further, presence of a few of these characteristics in isolation does not necessarily indicate achievement of High Performing System state. Rather, when a unit has achieved HPS quality, most of these characteristics will probably be observable.