

BEST PRACTICE ARTICLES

Developing Relevant, Relatable, and Transformative Training Programs at the Unit Level

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This article presents a structured approach for Unit Ministry Teams (UMTs) to develop training that is relevant, relatable, and transformative. Using personal experiences and educational theory, the authors outline a process for UMTs to create training. The article explains the process as determining learning needs, defining clear learning goals, developing learning objectives, and designing learning activities. It provides a method for designing engaging learning activities that facilitate active participation. By aligning training with the commander's intent and leveraging the UMT's passions and expertise, the article aims to enhance the effectiveness of UMT training, ultimately contributing to the readiness and resilience of Soldiers. The article concludes with a call for UMTs to evolve and adapt to meet the training needs of their units.

One Friday night a phone call woke me up just past midnight. It was the executive officer of the battalion, and he said the commander needed me at the headquarters immediately. I served as the chaplain for a military police (MP) unit involved in an incident where a soldier, who had been detained by the MPs, died after resisting arrest, after he was also tased and pepper sprayed. I spent that night and the following days with the soldiers who had been at the scene. During that time, I discovered that none of them had received training on how to cope with traumatic events, unlike civilian police officers, who typically do. Sensing a training gap, I approached the commander with the idea that inbound MPs might benefit from training on how to emotionally, mentally, and spiritually process harrowing police work since they would undoubtedly encounter it. I developed the training and began teaching it in the unit. Even though I was passionate and eager to

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help my soldiers, I thought that my training could have been more effective. Though I sought to meet a relevant need, I was not convinced that the training was as relatable or transformative as it could have been.¹ I needed a better way to develop training.

Unit Ministry Teams (UMTs) are often tasked with or take the initiative to lead training focused on spiritual, moral, and relational competencies within their units. They typically use a variety of training materials, including required programs (such as the Building Strong and Ready Teams curriculum or Division-mandated training), revered resources (like *The Five Love Languages*), and recycled content (such as training packages shared informally by other chaplains at the grassroots level). While some chaplains create their own training for specific situations, others express the desire for more guidance and direction. Chaplains at the unit level often see specific training needs and are best situated to provide focused training. By empowering chaplains to create unit-level training, the Chaplain Corps benefits from improved teaching skills and wider use of excellent training. In this paper, we present a process for chaplains to use in developing training that is relevant, relatable, and transformative.

Determine the Learning Needs

UMTs must constantly assess what the most pressing issues are in the unit and how their training expertise can address those needs. There are three considerations in determining the learning needs of a unit. First, UMTs must examine the commander's priorities and philosophies. Often these are laid out in initial counseling documents, the commander's leadership philosophy, and/or the commander's training guidance. By studying the commander's intent, UMTs may leverage the commander's direction such that the UMT is equipped to meet key priorities and thus provide value to the unit.

When I looked at my current commander's priorities and saw a focus on integrity, character, and education, I knew that I could nest a moral leadership and character development training program under those priorities. Immediately this became something more than just a "Chaplain Program;" it was and is my commander's program and that carries more weight with downstream leaders.²

Second, UMTs should keep as part of their running estimate a section on unit learning needs.³ The commander may provide clear and distinct ideas on learning needs to feed the running estimate. Additionally, there are at

¹ Chaplain Crain

² Chaplain McCary.

³ "A running estimate is the continuous assessment of the current situation used to determine if the current operation is proceeding according to the commander's intent and if planned future operations are supportable." Department of the Army, *The Operations Process* (ADP 5-0) (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2022), 1-12.

least two more sources for keeping and adding to the training portion of the running estimate: During unit circulation, query leaders to ascertain what issues they are seeing at their level and ask soldiers to determine from their perspective what training they think they need. Ask the overarching question: What are any unit-wide events, issues, or problems that UMT training could help address?

Third, UMTs should ask themselves what they are passionate about. Where do UMT passions, commander's guidance, and unit needs align? Frederick Buechner writes: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁴ While UMTs do not always get to choose their training, they should seize opportunities that dovetail with their gifts, passions and experience. One of the best things that ever happened to me was having a field grade chaplain tell me, "Don't just copy my stuff. Make it your own."⁵ He had created a brigade-wide Leadership Development Program (LPD) using David Brooks' book, *The Road to Character*, as one of the resources. I was certainly tempted to just grab his products, slap some new unit crests on them, and call it good. Instead, I bought the book and read through it making copious notes, developing my own workbook and a four-session LPD. This was all because a chaplain encouraged me to lean into my passions and giftings, do the work, and make it my own.

By determining the learning needs of the unit, UMTs make themselves relevant to command and to soldiers. They demonstrate the ability to discern the commander's intent while identifying a training gap that exists which they can uniquely address.

Define the Learning Goal

Learning goals are broad, general overarching statements that outline what UMTs want soldiers to learn and typically reflect a specific outcome or a particular skill. After identifying the learning needs, UMTs should ask some key questions to define the learning goal. What is the overall goal of the training? What do I want Soldiers to be able to do? Always begin with the end state in mind. By defining the learning goal, UMTs envision how soldiers will be different in a concrete way because of the training conducted.⁶

During this action step, UMTs utilize categories from the spiritual domain to define learning goals that are transformative. The Chaplain Corps is especially suited to assist Soldiers in identifying their purpose, values, beliefs, identity

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993), 119.

⁵ Chaplain McCary.

⁶ The learning goal is similar to the Joint Doctrinal term, measure of effectiveness, which is a "A criterion used to assess changes in system behavior, capability, or operational environment that is tied to measuring the attainment of an end state, achievement of an objective, or creation of an effect," Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operations* (JP 3-0) (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2011), GL-13.

and life dimension.⁷ Transformation occurs when Soldiers integrate their past with new insights and skills to develop meaning and purpose so that they are unshakable under the adversity of combat and everyday life.

Ideally, there is one learning goal for the training and it is stated in one sentence. It can take the form of “This training exists in order to...” or “this training is crucial because it will.....” For instance, during a deployment, the S-6 expressed concern to me over his shop’s ability to communicate effectively (a learning need) and asked me to help them out. I developed a training with this learning goal: “This training exists in order to enable soldiers to effectively utilize practical and healthy communication principles and to navigate and resolve conflicts in a constructive manner, enhancing cohesion and mission effectiveness.” This training was linked to the commander’s guidance of building cohesive teams and expressed the Army’s commitment to character manifesting itself in actions.⁸ Thus, the best learning goals are nested with the commander’s intent and aligned with Army doctrine.⁹

The training should impact soldiers’ lives in a tangible, practical way. “Particularly strong [learning goal statements] include an affective-behavioral [component].....that helps students make emotional connection and discover sense and significance in the material.”¹⁰ Transformation, not information, is crucial. Not all soldiers have to acknowledge the need for the learning goal because some may require convincing that there is a problem. Others may assume that they have the answers already. Wherever soldiers are, they can be invited to use their experience and expertise for the benefit of the learning community.

Learning goals using the same training material may change from one unit to the next. For example, training a unit of medical personnel with a highly educated cohort of medical officers and NCOs requires a different learning goal than a basic training unit. Knowing your people (the learning need) ensures that UMTs provide relevant training rather than cookie cutter instruction.

UMTs must resist the urge to define multiple learning goals for any training. A well-defined learning goal will keep the training focused and will drive the learning objectives.

⁷ Department of the Army, *Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness* (AR 350-53) (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2024), 11.

⁸ “Character consists of the moral and ethical qualities of an individual revealed through their decisions and actions. Leaders must consistently demonstrate good character and inspire others to do the same,” Department of the Army, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (ADP 6-22) (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2019), 2-1.

⁹ The commander’s guidance provides overall direction and left and right limits. Combining commander’s guidance, Army doctrine, and the UMT’s gifts, education, and religious/denominational perspective gives a great deal of freedom of maneuver for powerful and effective training.

¹⁰ Perry Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education: A Practical Handbook for Integrative Learning* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2022), 195.

Develop the Learning Objectives

After the learning needs are determined and the overall learning goal defined, the next step is to develop learning objectives.¹¹ While learning goals cast an overall vision for the training, learning objectives are action-oriented and performance-focused. Learning objectives fall into three domains:

Cognitively: What should soldiers know? What mental skills should soldiers gain?

Affectively: How should soldiers feel? What new motivations should soldiers acquire?

Behaviorally: What should soldiers be able to do with what they have learned? What skills should they demonstrate?¹²

For trainings lasting from one hour to one day, UMTs can feasibly expect to achieve three learning objectives at most but a more modest goal of two is perhaps wise. “Educators consistently try to pack too much content into the time available for the learning event.”¹³ To develop a learning objective UMTs envision actions the soldiers will do in the future based on a standard.¹⁴ FM 7-0 provides some helpful guidance: “A standard is the proficiency required to accomplish a task under a specified set of conditions that reflect the dynamic complexities of operational environments to include cyber, electronic warfare, and hybrid threats.”¹⁵

For instance, the learning objectives in training the S-6 shop were, “Soldiers will identify weaknesses in their current communication patterns and Soldiers will practice the principles of effective communication.” Notice that this learning objective has two components and involves Soldiers self-assessing current behavior against a standard of effective communication. This objective also includes an implied affective component because deep reflection on current practice invokes feelings and motivations. Practicing principles of effective communication incorporates new knowledge into an exercise that involves the whole person, which leads to designing relatable activities that drive home the relevant content.

11 The learning objective is similar to a measure of performance: “A criterion used to assess friendly actions that is tied to measuring task accomplishment,” Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operations*, GL-13.

12 Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education*, 196. Shaw notes that these domains are useful constructs but are also arbitrary in that holistic teaching often uses all three in multidimensional learning.

13 Jane Vella, *On Teaching and Learning: Putting the Principles and Practices of Dialogue Education into Action* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 36.

14 There are numerous helpful verb charts online to develop learning objectives. For one example, see “Verb List for Writing Educational Objectives,” accessed December 9, 2024, https://www.unthsc.edu/center-for-innovative-learning/wp-content/uploads/sites/35/verbs_checklist.pdf.

15 Department of the Army, *Training* (FM 7-0) (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2021), 1-10.

Design the Learning Activities

Once the learning needs are determined, the learning goal defined, and the learning objectives developed, it is time to get to the meat of the training. The focus here is on learning activities that enable the student to gain greater facility in the material. Learning activities are exercises the learner does based on instructional design. Perry Shaw says,

Active learning is the key to quality educational practice. At the simplest level active learning is where students ‘do’ things while thinking about the things they are doing. . . . The defining characteristics of active learning are that the learners are dynamic participants in their learning and that they are reflecting on both the process and the results of their learning.¹⁶

Lawrence Richards provides a classic example of how to develop student-centric learning activities. His approach can be summed up as the hook, book, look, and took method.¹⁷

Hook: Begin the training with a motivator that engages soldiers. You want to get their attention, stimulate their curiosity, create emotional buy-in, and show relevancy. Ask, why is this training meaningful to soldiers? Why should soldiers care? The hook should flow into the training. If possible, the hook is the first thing that is done in the training, not administrative tasks that may be necessary, but which can be accomplished later.

Book: Provide the cognitive meat of the training here. Decide which method you will use to impart new information to soldiers. UMTs can utilize lecture, guided reading, interactive PowerPoint, forums, interviews, and so on.

Look: Explore the general ramifications and implications of the new knowledge gained. Here soldiers are given the opportunity to reflect on what they are learning, analyze it critically, and begin to question how it relates to a general context.

Took: Give the students the time to apply the training material practically to their own context. Training that is cognitive only and which does not lead to action is ineffective. An effective way to do this is to create open-ended questions that lead soldiers to consider how the training might impact their professional and personal lives. Develop activities that use learning objectives such as “practice, implement, compare, defend, judge and recommend” to give soldiers the opportunity to “take” from the training.

¹⁶ Perry Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education: A Practical Handbook for Integrative Learning*, 241.

¹⁷ Lawrence Richards, *Creative Bible Teaching* (Chicago: Moody, 1970). It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve deeply into the vast topic of lesson design. Some helpful resources for further professional development are Perry Shaw’s *Transforming Theological Education*, 223-273; Jane Vella’s *On Teaching and Learning*, 32-47; and Daniel T. Willingham’s *Why Don’t Students Like School? A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions about How the Mind Works and What it Means for Your Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

A best practice for generating ideas for hook, book, look, and took is to query leadership for the raw materials needed. In giving a moral leadership training class, I asked a seasoned company commander what he thought the most pressing ethical issues were in the unit and that he had seen in his career that might impact the unit now. We developed eight scenarios we thought new NCOs will encounter in their career and then used those in the training.¹⁸ The Army ethical framework was presented, providing knowledge (book and look), and then NCOs used the principles to develop solutions to the real-life cases (took).

The hook, book, look, and took method can be used for stand-alone lessons and reiterated to develop larger blocks of training. A helpful perspective is to use a concept the Army excels at, sets and reps. In basic training, Soldiers spend the better part of three weeks on the range or doing some sort of marksmanship training every day. Each “activity” is designed to progress them forward from the fundamentals such as safe weapon handling, to breathing, to sight picture, to posture, and then days and days of practice putting rounds down range. That all culminates with a test (qualification day) to ensure all the learning activities achieve the desired learning goal.

Sets and reps can be used in more expansive UMT training. In a moral leadership training program developed for basic trainees, the design was to move trainees week by week through self-reflection and study on the Army Values, reinforced by the mentoring and coaching of their drill sergeants, and culminating in a capstone class where soldiers considered the whole of basic training and their character development journey throughout.¹⁹ Each activity built toward the capstone where soldiers were introduced to some basic concepts in Aristotelian virtue ethics that they were learning all along but did not realize until the capstone. Sets and reps combined with hook, book, look, and took creates memorable training that is reinforced through successive iterations.

During this phase of design, UMTs should beware of two pitfalls. First, chaplains, especially those gifted at preaching, are tempted to prioritize teaching through lecture alone. Lecture can be very effective, especially in conveying new knowledge or technical content. A more holistic approach is to implement an active learning strategy.²⁰ UMTs should deploy techniques which encourage the application of knowledge through activities that engage higher-order thinking. For example, UMTs may lecture on a topic and then have soldiers brainstorm in pairs or groups to apply the principles learned to

¹⁸ CH Crain.

¹⁹ CH McCary.

²⁰ Scott Freeman, Sarah L. Eddy, Miles McDonough, and Mary Pat Wenderoth, “Active Learning increases Student Performance in Science, Engineering, and Mathematics,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of the Science* 111: 23 (2014): 8410-8415, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1319030111>.

their lives. Second, and related, it is common to focus on knowledge alone as if soldiers' brains are like buckets into which trainers pour their ideas. A more effective way is to provide knowledge only on the essential learning objectives with learning tasks that are relevant to those objectives using techniques that engage the senses and other neural pathways. UMTs are familiar with how religious traditions engage the whole person and need to shift their mindset from the context of worship to the context of the classroom.

Conclusion

Future wars will be complex and dynamic, requiring UMTs who can evolve and adapt to meet the training needs of their units. UMTs need to be multiskilled leaders “who readily comprehend the challenges of constantly evolving conditions” and “employ openness and imagination to create effective organizational learning conditions.”²¹ Using best practices from education theory combined with Army doctrine ensures UMTs construct relevant, relatable, and transformational training that improves the lives of soldiers and contributes to the readiness and mission success of the organization. By doing so, UMTs demonstrate their desire and ability to develop themselves and the institution.

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²¹ Department of the Army, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 6-14.