

Chapter 8

Social Leadership: Exploring Social Media and the Military – A New Leadership Tool

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will identify the military's approach to social media and outline the security controversy it views as an inherent issue associated with condoning and promoting the use of social media. It will then discuss how that approach is evolving with the passage of time and the rapid adoption of social media by society as a whole; examining the balance between security concerns and obvious organizational benefits. In discussing social media as a vehicle of transformational leadership this chapter will reveal untapped benefits of social media in a military context and examine where and how it could be adopted. In closing this chapter will make recommendations, which would facilitate a better adoption of various forms of social media by the military.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike its corporate counterparts the military has unique challenges associated with benefiting from the adoption and use of social media. While corporations want to protect information related to competitive advantage, unique processes and other sensitive data that might aid their competitors - the military has a much graver concern as it relates to the release of sensitive data. On the other hand as the use of various social media

platforms and sites become more prevalent in the ranks of the military, and controlling the restriction of the use of those sites becomes more difficult, an understanding is developing that if used properly – social media can be an effective tool for creating military advantage; specifically in the areas of recruiting and public relations.

Reaching the generation Y or Millennium generation through social media platforms allows the military access to the next generation of recruits. With the advent of Facebook pages and Tweets, to name just two of the many social media avenues,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-203-1.ch008

the military has a vehicle to create a new face from a public relations perspective.

Despite strong benefits the military still struggles in trying to balance the potential gain of this new media with the possible damage it could do operational security (OPSEC). It is important to note however that both of these consideration focus on an external perspective; how social media impacts what comes out of the military whether that be a recruitment drive, an advertising or marketing push designed to change public opinion, or in the worst case the release of sensitive data. Little if any of the coverage or thought leadership around social media and the military is giving any consideration to how social media might be used internally as a leadership tool.

With all of the promise that this concept brings it does not come without its challenges. The military cannot easily take full advantage of social media, as do corporations, without some special considerations. Social media has built a new platform for what can be defined as social leadership. For a corporation to foster an environment where leadership and the next great idea rise from the shop floor or out of a bag in the mail room clearly creates a competitive advantage. Social knowledge supports the concept that good ideas can rise from the bottom as easily as they can slip from the middle or descend from the top. A corporation willing to restructure traditional top down leadership opens itself to a world of possibilities and creates an environment where people feel a sense of ownership and contribution. By creating such an environment what is, in effect, happening is the democratization of social knowledge. When you apply the same strain of thought to the Military it is fair to say that the military and democracy share allegiance only in as much as one defends the other. The military, while it defends democracy, need not incorporate any of its principles in providing that defense; in fact at its core it is an “I say – you do” institution that does not look to leadership from the bottom. With the rapid adoption of social media there

now exists the opportunity for junior leaders, at any rank, to provide social leadership that has the potential of swaying opinion both inside and outside of the military circle. The challenge is how to harness and capitalize on that leadership without unraveling the very fabric of the institution. The Military is going to have to accept, to some degree, the democratization of social knowledge in order to benefit from all it can bring as a new tool in its leadership arsenal.

BACKGROUND

If Social Knowledge is the use of social media to create, transfer, and preserve organizational knowledge – past, present, and future – with a view to achieving the organizational vision; it can be argued that the military is undergoing a transformation with respect to its approach to this new battlefield and what vision it wants to create.

In the early days of social media the military treated it, as it does with all unknowns, solely as a threat. There were, and to a large degree still exist, serious concerns around social media sites and operational security (OPSEC). Fears were rampant that social media had the potential to put sensitive information into the wrong hands.

In February of 2008 the Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC) reported on the Canadian Forces attempts to ban use, by members, of social media sites such as Facebook citing concerns around OPSEC. They reported on a memo issued by DND to warn members of the dangers:

Al Qaeda operatives are monitoring Facebook and other social networking sites...

This may seem overdramatic ... [but] the information can be used to target members for further exploitation. It also opens the door for your families and friends to become potential targets as well (CBC News, 2008).

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