

# Stamping Out Sexual Assault

Effective messaging to generate “buy-in”

by LtCol David Bardorf

Gen James F. Amos became the Marine Corps’ 35th Commandant in 2010, taking the helm as fiscal storm clouds darkened the horizon. His leadership, always attentive to the welfare of the Marines, focused keenly not just on the business of leading the Corps, but also squarely on the spiritual health of the Marine Corps—a health threatened by the conduct of a few. Gen Amos faces a daunting challenge, one not previously addressed on the scale required to be useful as a historical reference. The challenge is that of sexual assault:

Sexual assault is an ugly mark on our proud reputation; it goes against everything we claim to be as United States Marines. . . . It is a crime . . . and we will eradicate it from the Corps.<sup>1</sup>

The fight against sexual assault requires the direct involvement of Marines of all ranks. Commanders draw the line of battle and establish the environment and the command climate that set the conditions for success. However, success in this fight depends on the engagement of those on the front line: the young Marines, and specifically the NCOs. The campaign plan against sexual assault must garner the ownership of the Corps’ NCOs; “buy-in” of those on the front line. The success of the Commandant’s campaign against sexual assault is dependent upon effective, targeted messaging that generates buy-in on the part of the Corps’ NCOs.

Sexual assault in the military grabbed the attention of military and civilian leadership in 1991. The infamous Tailhook convention prompted congressional inquiry and investigation

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into the occurrence of sexual harassment throughout the Armed Services. The findings of the investigating body opined that the scale of sexual harassment and assault that took place at the Tailhook convention was so large that it constituted a “one of the kind of event.” Of greater concern was the question of leadership and culture. The attitudes that permitted it to occur are not isolated, but rather, they are so widespread in the Services that basic cultural change

will be necessary to limit the harassment.<sup>2</sup>

To achieve cultural change, the committee proposed the following tools: 1) leadership commitment to change the prevalence of attitudes that permit sexual harassment, 2) career-long periodic mandatory sexual assault awareness training, and 3) clear demonstration through disciplinary action and career impact that certain behaviors are not tolerated.<sup>3</sup> Each Armed Service issued a policy stating zero tolerance for sexual harassment and implemented an annual training program: a mandatory, once-a-year class on sexual harassment. It was not enough.

Further high-profile sexual assault incidents occurred in subsequent years. In 1996, the Army investigated and substantiated allegations that uniformed in-



**To effectively battle sexual assault, Marines of all ranks have to be involved.** (Photo by LCpl Michael Thom.)

structors at Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD, had sexually assaulted and raped female trainees under their charge. In 2003, the Air Force Academy substantiated claims of rape and sexual assault conducted by and against students at the Academy. In 2012, an investigative documentary titled *The Invisible War* chronicled the problem of sexual assault and harassment within the U.S. military. The documentary sparked public outrage at the military's handling of sexual assault cases, victims, and alleged assailants. The film portrayed the military as an environment in which 20 percent of servicewomen are victims of sexual assault; a culture that protects the alleged assailant and condemns the victim.<sup>4</sup> The investigations mentioned above were not the one-of-a-kind event that characterized Tailhook.

Rather than being a one-of-a-kind incident, sexual assault in the military is rampant, demanding direct action and engaged leadership to eliminate it from plaguing the Armed Forces. The *Department of Defense Annual Report for Sexual Assault* reveals the scope of the problem of sexual assault in the military. In the Pentagon's 2012 report, the Marine Corps' numbers gashed the soul of a Service that prides itself on its core values of honor, courage, and commitment. The report revealed that 10 percent of female Marines were victims of unwanted sexual contact, documenting 333 unrestricted reports and an additional 102 restricted reports of sexual assault. The report found that servicemembers in their first years of enlistment, those between the age of 18 and 24, and in the pay grade of E-1 (private) through E-4 (corporal), were most at risk.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most sobering statistic is the estimate that approximately 80 percent of sexual assaults go unreported.<sup>6</sup> To a Commandant utterly committed to the well being of his Marines, to a general who, for 39 years and counting, lives by the mantra of engaged leadership, the disheartening reality of these offenses is that Marines are committing these crimes against their fellow Marines: 96 percent of the perpetrators are military personnel.<sup>7</sup>

Recognizing the magnitude of the problem and faced with the realization

that crimes of this nature are tearing at the very ethos of the Marine Corps, Gen Amos declared war on sexual assault. In June 2012, Gen Amos introduced the plan to combat sexual assault in the Marine Corps. The Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) campaign plan is:

... built around engaged leadership at every level and underscores the importance of reaffirming and strengthening the trust between Marines and their leaders.<sup>8</sup>

The campaign plan has two primary lines of operation (LOOs) built on a foundation of engaged leadership. The first LOO is prevention of sex crimes: getting left of the incident. The second LOO is response to sex crime: taking care of Marines. At the heart of prevention is bystander intervention and "a reawakening within our Corps . . . a refocus on our ethos and values . . . a refocus on who we are . . . and what we do."<sup>9</sup> The soul of response is the absolute care of and advocacy for the victims of sex crimes, a command climate that fosters a victim's confidence that he/she will be safe, well cared for, and treated with respect and dignity, and that offenders are accountable for their actions. The intent of the Marine Corps' SAPR program is clear:

... we will not rest until we eliminate sexual assault from our ranks and regain the trust of our Marines and the American people.<sup>10</sup>

Every Marine in uniform has participated in SAPR training. Every Marine has heard the Commandant's message. Evinced by the increase in sexual assault reporting, positive change is occurring:

The Marine Corps has seen a rise in sexual assault reports that coincide with the inception of the 2012 SAPR Campaign Plan. We believe this indicates increased level of trust between victims and their leaders.<sup>11</sup>

While increased reporting indicates success and positive change in the "response" LOO, sexual assaults continued to occur with unacceptable frequency, indicating an inability to "get left of the incident."

Prevention will require cultural change and engaged leadership. Cultural change will take time to achieve and will require the complete buy-in of every Marine, from the newest private to the most senior general officer. Buy-in occurs when there is a common understanding, universal commitment, and dedicated action in support of goals.<sup>12</sup> After 2 years of training, classes, lectures, discussion groups, and situational vignettes, sexual assault continues to occur. It is an issue of buy-in to affect change. Mark Walton, in his book titled *Generating Buy-In*, writes, "The age old secret of generating buy-in is to strategically design, target and deliver a story that projects a positive future."<sup>13</sup> The key, Walton suggests, is to establish a strategic storyline that targets the audience's agenda and calls the audience to action.

The Commandant's heritage brief, which Gen Amos and Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Micheal Barrett personally delivered to all SNCOs and officers aboard all major Marine Corps installations in the spring of 2012, is just such a story designed to call the Corps to action. The heritage brief advocates the reawakening of the soul of the Marine Corps, a reaffirmation to live by the core values of honor, courage, and commitment. The brief advocated for the moral and ethical conduct of Marines in battle and in garrison, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Unfortunately, allegations and accusations of undue command influence overshadowed the positive intent of the brief. Postbrief discussions by Marines focused on the visible anger of the Commandant and the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps at the leadership failings of officers, SNCOs, and NCOs. Compounding the sullen message was its delivery on the heels of a number of high-profile command reliefs. While the intent of the brief was an affirmation of the Corps' proud heritage, it did not generate buy-in throughout the ranks. "The best way out of bad news, crisis, and controversy is to generate buy-in for a positive future, rather than dwell on the problems of the past."<sup>14</sup> To generate the buy-in necessary to change the culture of an institution like the Marine Corps, the

communication must be targeted and effective.

There is no doubt that the senior leadership within the Marine Corps understands the intent of the Commandant. Commanding officers and senior enlisted leaders are committed to eliminating sex crimes from the ranks of the Marine Corps. The Corps has done everything possible to advertise the campaign against sex assault. The message is out there, but is forced and lacks what Malcom Gladwell in his book, *The Tipping Point*, calls the “stickiness factor,” or the propensity for an idea or a trend to take hold and be enduring. For the message to be truly enduring, it must ignite discussion outside of training, take on a life of its own, and become a part of the culture that resonates up and down the chain of command.

The challenge is to effectively communicate the message to the targeted audience in a manner that will generate buy-in. The first hurdle is to articulate the message in a manner that is both recognizable and understood by the target audience. The pitfall to avoid is the lesson that “many leaders tend to see the world from the point of view of their own operations and are unaware of any other way to see the world.”<sup>15</sup> That which is abundantly clear and understandable to senior leaders is not necessarily clear and understandable to young Marines. The bottom line is that a 40-year-old lieutenant colonel communicates differently than a 20-year-old lance corporal. Effective leadership cannot be maintained in an organization without an adequate system of intercommunication.<sup>16</sup> Successful communication is a matter of effective messaging. Effective messaging depends upon properly targeting the audience with an understandable concept that calls them to action.

Effective targeting requires knowing the audience. In this case, the target audience is between the ages of 18 and 25 and from a generation labeled “millennials.” Millennials are a generation that grew up in the world of the Internet, enjoys instant access to information, and has a strong sense of entitlement, and whose guiding morality is nothing more than what feels right at the time.<sup>17</sup>

Largely, millennials do not identify with big institutions, nor do they respect or resent authority.<sup>18</sup> This is a very broad characterization of a generation; it is important to note that those millennials who joined the Marine Corps are also in possession of a sense of duty to their country. Effective messaging that will generate the necessary buy-in of the target audience must leverage this sense of duty to bridge this generational and communication gap.

Optimally, the goal would be to energize within the target audience what Malcolm Gladwell calls connectors, mavens, and salesmen—the three personality types needed for an idea or

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behavior to take hold and attain epidemic influence.<sup>19</sup> Connectors have ties to many different social groups and act as conduits of information, mavens help others make informed decisions, and salesmen have the natural charisma and persuasiveness to confidently sell an idea. The three elements work together to energize a concept, influence social behavior, and affect enduring change. The three elements already exist in the Marine Corps. All three are resident in the Corps’ NCOs—the backbone of the Corps. NCOs provide the leadership conduit between young Marines and senior leadership. They are the first line of leadership and mentorship to today’s young Marines. They, more so than any other level of leadership, are in the position to understand and influence the behavior and conduct of the millennials.

Appropriately, Marine Corps leadership has tasked NCOs to receive “take a stand training,” which advocates bystander intervention. Using the knowledge gained during the training, NCOs are supposed to mentor junior

Marines—but has buy-in been generated? Have the NCOs been called to action? Are they performing the rolls of mavens, connectors, and salesmen to fuel the engine that will drive cultural change? Not yet, as they have not yet developed the sense of issue ownership that empowers them to lead the change.

Just as the Corps’ general officers and commanders were brought together to discuss the problem of sexual assault, so too must NCOs be brought together to discuss ideas that will drive change. The Marine Corps should solicit the attendance and participation of the best and brightest NCOs from across the Service in a forum similar in construct to the Russell Leadership Conference. The purpose of the conference would be to hear ideas from NCOs on how they think the Corps can best attack the problem of sex crimes. The NCOs can translate the intent and purpose of the Corps’ SAPR program in a manner that the target audience can relate to and understand. The ability to provide such input would generate a sense of ownership and a sense of responsibility—in short, buy-in. NCO councils formed at the division, regiment, battalion, squadron, and company levels will generate the same sense of ownership and buy-in. The council would be a venue for two-way communication to solicit ideas and discuss options and methods to address critical issues like sexual assault, victim advocacy, and suicide prevention. The council would inspire the voice of the NCO and provide an additional venue to positively influence the behavior of young Marines. Vitrally, the NCO council could provide insight to bridge the communication gap between senior leaders and millennials, thus building the road toward the cultural change needed to eradicate sex crimes from the Marine Corps.

Nothing replaces the role of the commander to champion the purpose of the SAPR program and to create a command climate that fosters trust and confidence in the leadership. The commanding officer’s charge is to ensure good order and discipline within the ranks, to create a command climate of trust and respect, and to be the engaged leader who will drive the cultural change



required to eradicate sex crimes from the military; however, NCOs will spark the buy-in of the young Marines—the buy-in that will be the difference between cultural change and an annual training requirement. Seek their input.

### Notes

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