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THIS WEEK'S FEATURE

Pulling the Cord: What our Military Needs to Learn from the Auto Industry

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In early 1981, a delegation of Ford and United Auto Workers leaders traveled to Japan to study how Toyota, Nissan and Mazda reached such high quality and productivity.[1] Detroit had just posted record losses, with American automakers and suppliers losing a combined $4.2 billion in 1980.[2]

The secret turned out to be a rope. Strung along Toyota's assembly lines was the andon cord, and any worker who spotted a problem could pull it. The first pull summoned a team leader, and if the fix took too long, the line stopped.[3] Toyota took issue with the idea that workers merely had a right to pull the cord. In its view, they were obligated to pull it when they found a problem.[4]

Many executives came home having missed the point. When the first trip reports reached Detroit, many drew the wrong conclusion, saying the Japanese were simply harder workers, more disciplined, and prouder of their work.[5]

The American system ran on the opposite instinct. In traditional GM factories, workers were not permitted to stop the assembly line.[6] GM's Fremont, California plant was one of its worst in productivity, quality and labor relations, and it closed in 1982.[7]

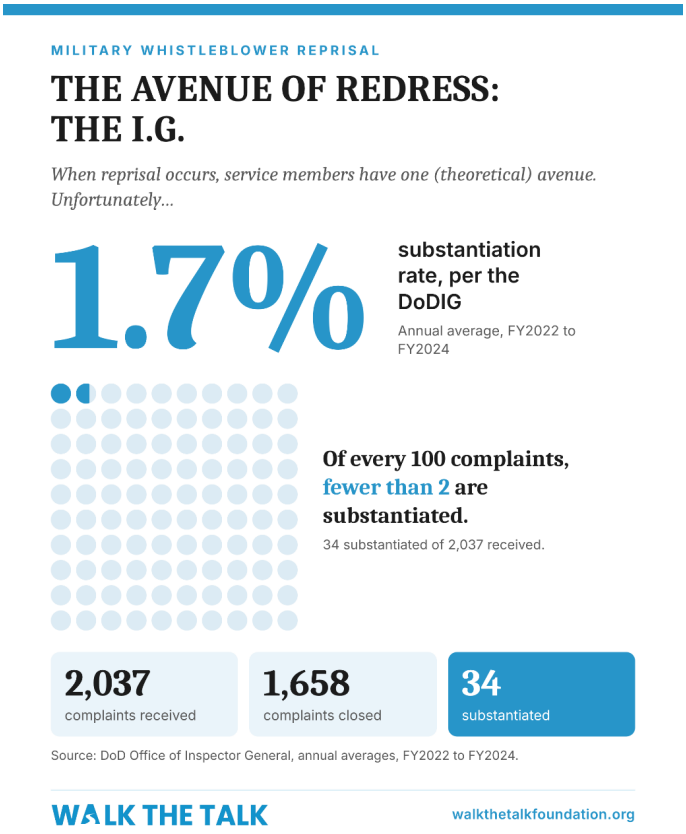
Then came the experiment. In 1984, Toyota and GM reopened Fremont as NUMMI. About 85 percent of its workers at start-up were UAW members from the old GM plant.[8] Toyota began flying groups of about 30 workers to Japan to learn its system.[9] One of GM's worst plants became one of its best, practically overnight.[10] The workers had not changed. The system had. GM's attempt to repeat the result at Van Nuys the next year met workers who were skeptical from the start.[10]

Now consider the military's cord.

A service member who reports waste, a safety failure, or misconduct is doing exactly what Toyota asked of its line workers. Congress said it wanted this. The Military Whistleblower Protection Act, 10 U.S.C. 1034, was enacted in September 1988.[11] The window to file a reprisal complaint was recently extended from 60 days to one year.[12] An IG must complete an investigation within 180 days or notify the servicemember.[13] The Government Accountability Office has audited this system for decades, and its titles tell the story: "Continuing Impediments to Protection of Military Members" in 1995, and "Actions Needed to Improve DOD's Military Whistleblower Reprisal Program" in 2012.[14]

The numbers say the cord rarely works. By the Defense Department Inspector General's own data, only 1.7 percent of military reprisal cases are substantiated.[15] Independent analysis points the same way. A Congressional Research Service estimate found 92 substantiated out of 3,811 closed reprisal allegations from fiscal 2017 through 2019, about 2.4 percent.[16] When more than 98 in 100 claims fail, everyone watching learns the same lesson: retaliating against a whistleblower costs the retaliator almost nothing.

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Detroit learned that lesson too. When stopping the line costs you, nobody stops it. Defects ride downstream until they are too large to hide, and leaders are left with a comforting picture that no longer matches reality. In a factory the defects are door panels. In the military they are failed equipment, unsafe training and broken leadership, and the cost is measured in lives.

Aviation learned this the hard way. Safety reporting systems and crew resource management exist because accidents proved silence kills. A first officer is expected to challenge a captain, and nobody calls it disloyalty.[17]

The fix is not mysterious. Make reporting a rewarded behavior. Take reprisal investigations out of the hands of those with a stake in the outcome. Track what happens to people after they come forward and hold leaders accountable when careers suffer. Treat every report as free quality control.

Toyota built the best cars in the world by trusting its people to stop the line. The American military has the most capable people in the world. It should give them a cord and mean it when they pull it.

NOTES

1. Ford–UAW delegation, 1981: leanblog.org/2026/01/ford-uaw-japan-1981-lessons/
2. 1980 industry loss: ts.autoblog.com/features/this-is-how-toyota-taught-gm-how-to-build-cars
3. Andon cord sequence: npr.org/transcripts/125229157
4. Toyota's "obligation" framing (secondary source; confirm against a Toyota or Jeffrey Liker source before publishing): sixsigmadaily.com/?p=5211
5. Executives' "harder workers" conclusion: leanblog.org/2026/01/lean-lessons-from-japan-listening/
6. Adler et al., "NUMMI: Stability and Change": msbfile03.usc.edu/digitalmeasures/padler/intellcont/NummiStabilityAndChange-1.pdf
7. Same Adler paper.
8. Lean Enterprise Institute: lean.org/the-lean-post/articles/how-nummi-changed-its-culture/
9. Autoblog (note 2).
10. NPR (note 3).
11. GAO/NSIAD-92-125: gao.gov/assets/nsiad-92-125.pdf
12. DoD IG, "Enhancements to Military… Whistleblower Protections": dodig.mil
13. CRS IF11499: everycrsreport.com/reports/IF11499.html
14. GAO/NSIAD-95-23: gao.gov/assets/nsiad-95-23.pdf; GAO-12-362: gao.gov/products/GAO-12-362
15. DoD Office of Inspector General, annual averages, FY2022 to FY2024.

16. CRS IF11499, Tables 1–2 (note 13).
17. NASA, Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS) Program Briefing: asrs.arc.nasa.gov/docs/ASRS_ProgramBriefing.pdf; FAA, AC 120-66C, Aviation Safety Action Program (ASAP): faa.gov/documentLibrary/media/Advisory_Circular/AC_120-66C.pdf

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