

Building a Strong Nutrition Culture

A Military Leader's Guidebook for Optimizing Nutrition Readiness



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Introduction

The U.S. Armed Forces are expected to maintain and display physical and mental excellence at all times. To achieve this, Service Members must maintain nutritional fitness as a foundation for readiness and performance. Despite the clear link between nutrition, health, and performance, Service Members face barriers to achieving nutrition readiness across the force. Military leaders are uniquely positioned to improve the military nutrition environment and culture to enhance operational readiness.

The concepts in this workbook are grounded in principles found in Currie et al.'s article titled "Building a Culture of Health Through Leader-Inspired Nutrition." Leader-Inspired Nutrition (LIN) is an evidence-based framework that focuses on a military leader's role in building a culture of health and performance by promoting healthy nutrition behaviors within their organization.

Who This Is For

The *Building a Strong Nutrition Culture Guidebook* by Human Performance Resources by CHAMP (HPRC) helps military leaders—both formal and informal—support nutrition readiness within their organizations.

Objectives

- Assess current nutrition culture within your unit or organization
- Build an action plan to improve nutrition readiness through leader-focused strategies

How to Use This Workbook

1. Begin by conducting a brief **Pillar Assessment** to prioritize pillars for improvement within your organization.
2. Choose one (or multiple) pillar(s) to address based on your assessment scores. Choose the number of pillars you address on your needs, resources, and bandwidth.
3. After choosing which pillar(s) to address, refer to the "**Pillar in Focus**" section for more in-depth pillar-specific information, strategies, and ideas to help improve the nutrition culture. Each "pillar in focus" section includes:
 - **Conversation starters:** Informally assess the culture by talking to Service Members and peers, or reflecting on the conversation starters yourself. Converse with curiosity and without judgment to get a clear picture of the organization's nutrition culture and needs.
 - **Barriers to consider:** Service Members may face barriers that leaders are unfamiliar with. Additionally, systemic barriers may exist that require collaborative efforts to change. You must acknowledge barriers, both big and small, for effective organizational change.
 - **Things you can do:** Military leaders can apply these strategies to improve the nutrition culture in their units. These lists are not exhaustive, and you may find other strategies that work better for your circumstances.
4. Finish by creating a **targeted action plan** to address gaps and build a strong military nutrition culture. You can come back to this workbook any time to reassess and apply new tips and strategies to your organization.

Nutrition subject matter experts cannot enhance military nutrition readiness alone. **Leaders at all levels must engage to promote a nutritionally ready force.**

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Nutrition is a mission-essential component of readiness. There are 4 critical pillars needed to support a mission-ready nutrition culture.



INTEGRATE NUTRITION EDUCATION & TRAINING

- Assess nutrition knowledge and skill
- Incorporate nutrition education into existing programs
- Promote evidence-based nutrition resources



PROMOTE A MISSION-READY FOOD ENVIRONMENT

- Assess the military food environment
- Address availability and access
- Establish whole-health worksite policies



MODEL PERFORMANCE-FOCUSED NUTRITION BEHAVIORS

- Model healthy behaviors
- Utilize installation professionals and resources
- Integrate messaging into mission communication



ADVANCE INFORMED USE OF DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS

- Provide training opportunities
- Encourage use of OPSS website
- Promote a "food-first" culture

Leader-Inspired Nutrition Critical Pillar Assessment

The role of the military leader is to empower Service Members to be fit for duty. Nutritional readiness is a critical component of mission readiness. This tool helps you assess the current state of each LIN critical pillar. Use the scores within each pillar to identify which areas you can focus on to have the greatest impact on your organization's nutrition culture.

Pillar Score: 0 – Never 1 – Rarely 2 – Sometimes 3 – Often

Critical Pillar: Integrate Nutrition Education and Training	Pillar Score
I have conversations with Service Members regarding nutrition related topics including how nutrition influences occupational performance, food access, and cooking skill.	
Nutrition education is integrated into existing training and readiness events, emphasizing its mission-relevance and ensuring regular touch-points.	
Service Members in my organization know where to find credible nutrition information, including local subject matter experts (registered dietitians, nutrition scientists, or nutrition care specialists) or validated online resources like HPRC, Military OneSource, and VA resources.	
Policies that ensure nutrition education is a consistent part of military training and development are in place and adhered to. If there are no policies in place, indicate "0 – Never."	
TOTAL	

Critical Pillar: Promote a Mission-Ready Food Environment	Pillar Score
Healthy food policies, access, and availability are assessed using the Military Nutrition Environment Assessment Tool (mNEAT), Climate Pulse surveys, or other measurement tool.	
Healthy meal options are easily accessible to Service Members (within the workspace or across the installation or community).	
Service Members have protected meal times and use them to eat and hydrate (as opposed to exercise or complete other non-eating tasks).	
Food establishments on base meet the operational demands and are open when Service Members need them (across various shifts).	
TOTAL	

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Pillar Score:

0 – Never

1 – Rarely

2 – Sometimes

3 – Often

Critical Pillar: Model Performance-Focused Nutrition Behaviors	Pillar Score
I model healthy eating behaviors by choosing well-rounded, high-quality meals and taking time for food and water breaks during the workday.	
I use credible online and in-person resources, such as installation registered dietitians, to answer nutrition-related questions and strengthen my own nutrition behaviors.	
I integrate nutrition messaging into team discussions, connecting nutrition to mission success.	
I speak to Service Members about how nutrition is linked to mental, social, financial, physical wellbeing, and mission readiness.	
TOTAL	

Critical Pillar: Advance the Informed Use of Dietary Supplements	Pillar Score
I have conversations with Service Members regarding dietary supplement use, labeling considerations, information finding, and awareness.	
Service Members in my organization are aware of and rely on Operation Supplement Safety (OPSS) to access evidence-based materials and inform dietary supplement choices.	
Service Members in my organization get dietary supplement training from subject matter experts from the OPSS program.	
Dietary supplement safety information is readily visible in key locations such as retail establishments, work-out facilities, and unit snack bars.	
TOTAL	

Which pillar has the highest score? (You're on track)

Which pillar has the lowest score? (There's room for improvement)

Which pillar(s) will you focus on to improve your organization's, unit's, or installation's nutrition culture?

Read more about the pillar(s) you decided to address in the "pillar in focus" section before moving on to develop your LIN action plan.

Leader-Inspired Nutrition Critical Pillars in Focus

CRITICAL PILLAR IN FOCUS:

Integrate Nutrition Education and Training

Knowledge helps you decide what to do, and skills ensure that you can do it. Both are required to successfully perform health-promoting behaviors. Nutrition education and training encompasses a broad range of competencies, such as understanding nutrient and hydration fundamentals; interpreting Nutrition Facts labels; recognizing the link between nutrition, health, and occupational performance; and applying cooking and food safety skills. Because nutrition misinformation is widespread, Service Members must possess the knowledge and skills to evaluate and apply safe and effective nutrition strategies to sustain operational readiness. By integrating nutrition knowledge and skill development throughout a Service Member's career, you can ensure personnel are better prepared to make sound choices that enhance their nutritional fitness and overall readiness.

Conversation Starters

- Why did they choose these meal options? What are their personal or professional goals, and how can nutrition help accomplish these goals?
- Are they comfortable cooking? What kinds of foods do they like to cook? Are there certain barriers to being able to prepare their own meals?
- Where does nutrition currently fit within the unit's training and readiness priorities? What existing systems, courses, or checklists could include a short nutrition component to reinforce its value and enhance outcomes?
- How can we collaborate across teams, such as dining facilities, performance teams, and training commands, to make nutrition education and resources more visible and accessible?

Barriers to Consider

- Competing operational demands may leave little room for dedicated nutrition education, or the training may be viewed as secondary to other aspects of military readiness training.
- Service Members may have low nutrition knowledge and cooking skills. They might also hold beliefs that can hinder behavior change, like thinking high-quality nutrition is "too expensive" or "doesn't impact their readiness."
- Cultural and social influences, or stigma, can influence food behaviors and the likelihood of a Service Member making dietary change or asking for help if they need it.
- Systemic barriers, such as lack of standardized nutrition curriculum and nutrition policy, frequent changes in command, and limited access to nutrition professionals can disrupt continuity and effectiveness of nutrition initiatives.

Things You Can Do

- Informally assess nutrition knowledge and skill by observing and getting to know Service Members in your organization. Frequent the dining facility during meal times, join your teams for gatherings, and observe nutrition and hydration practices during physical training (PT) or unit exercises. Include installation registered dietitians, if possible, to discuss observations and needs.
- Incorporate regular nutrition education briefs into operations. Collaborate with installation experts (registered dietitians, health promotion experts, kitchen staff, or other qualified personnel) to discuss relevant nutrition topics or hold cooking classes. Make this information more mission-relevant and time efficient by integrating nutrition topics into existing training or readiness events, such as unit PT sessions, pre-mission briefs and checklists, or wellness stand-downs.
- Promote use of DoW and other Federal partners' information and education resources, such as [HPRC](#) and the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Nutrition and Food Services](#). Leaders do not need to be nutrition experts. Instead, use and promote the resources and tools developed by trusted subject matter experts to enhance organizational nutrition readiness.
- Advocate for policies that make nutrition education a consistent part of professional military training and development. Work with senior leaders, training commands, and health promotion teams to embed standardized, evidence-based content at key career milestones and throughout existing operating procedures (such as risk management resources) so that nutrition knowledge and skills are reinforced over time.

Go to [page 15](#) to develop a targeted action plan to address this pillar.

See the [Appendix](#) for a list of virtual resources.

CRITICAL PILLAR IN FOCUS:**Promote a Mission-Ready Food Environment**

The Military Nutrition Environment (MNE) includes all food, beverages, and dietary supplement options available within military settings. A supportive food environment enables Service Members to access and select choices that positively affect their nutritional readiness, and ensures they have protected time to adequately fuel and hydrate. Furthermore, a supportive food environment extends beyond the workplace and includes food access and availability where Service Members live, train, and fight. Challenges to the food environment will vary based on installation, region, and personnel demographics. Leaders can use informal conversations or formal assessments to understand their installation MNE strengths and weaknesses. Only then can you help improve the MNE through targeted policies and interventions to support health and operational readiness.

Conversation Starters

- What and where do they most commonly eat? And why?
- Do they have enough time during the day to access and eat high-quality meals?
- What are the barriers, if any, to accessing and eating well-balanced, nutrient-dense meals?
- Are they ever worried whether their food will run out before they are able to buy more?

Barriers to Consider

- Limited physical access to health-promoting food at work and at home can be due to distance, limited equipment to prepare or store foods, limited dining facility operating hours, shift work, and lack of personal vehicles to reach alternate food options. A Service Member's unit, or entire installation, might be located in a food desert where access to healthy food sources is limited or non-existent. Service Members who live in barracks can have additional barriers, such as strict food-related rules to follow, limited food preparation equipment, and lack of food storage capabilities. Alternatively, access to food or water might not be the problem, but limited access to bathroom facilities or proper human waste management practices can keep Service Members from adequate fueling or hydrating.
- Limited time to get or eat high quality foods due to high operational demands. Stigma or social culture can also make it difficult for Service Members to take a break to eat and hydrate, even if it is feasible in their day.
- Low food security, a condition where a household does not have consistent, dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living, is a concern in military populations. Low food security can be related to physical access to foods, but is also often related to financial or economic limitations. These limitations are worsened by increased food prices, national or global events affecting economics or food availability, spouse unemployment, and frequent relocations.
- Uniform policies do not exist to assess, share, or report information about installation food environments. Without healthy workplace policies, standards and initiatives can fluctuate with changes in leadership, time, and resources.

Things You Can Do

- Regularly assess installation [food security](#) and the [food environment](#). Get to know the Service Members, include food security questions in the Defense Organizational Climate Pulse survey, and collaborate with nutrition or health promotion experts to conduct an annual mNEAT assessment to evaluate the installation's healthy food policies, access, and availability.
- Partner with installation teams, like dining facility leadership, registered dietitians and health promotion educators, to align communication strategies and amplify existing programs that facilitate the selection of performance-focused foods, such as [Go for Green®](#) and Fueled to Fight®, [Commissary's Dietitian Approved Thumb](#) (DAT), and [HPRC's Power Plate](#).
- Share and promote existing [food security resources](#), Financial Readiness Officers, local food pantries, and resources available through [Military OneSource](#).
- Establish meaningful and specific healthy worksite policies. Advocate for policy and social culture that allows ample time for food and water breaks during the day, ensures dining facility operating hours reflect installation operational requirements and shifts, and ensures physical access to health-promoting foods.

Go to [page 15](#) to develop a targeted action plan to address this pillar.

For a list of virtual resources, see [Appendix](#).

CRITICAL PILLAR IN FOCUS:**Model Performance-Focused Nutrition Behaviors**

Promoting and practicing health-related behaviors by leaders is a key part of LIN. If leaders model healthy nutrition practices, Service Members are more likely to do the same. Leaders are not expected to take on the role of a registered dietitian and provide individual nutrition advice. Instead, model nutrition awareness by using installation nutrition-related resources, integrating talking points on the importance of nutrition for personal and team success, and demonstrating healthy nutrition habits across military settings.

Reflection

- Do I regularly model good nutrition practices, such as using Go for Green® coding in dining facilities to guide my choices, taking time away from my work for food and hydration breaks, and eating well-rounded, high-quality meals? Do my peers in leadership also model these practices?
- Do I regularly communicate the importance of good nutrition practices on mission success, encouraging the use of food for performance and discouraging extreme-restrictive practices? Do I incorporate evidence-based performance nutrition practices into my day to optimize my performance?
- Do I use the credible resources and subject matter experts available to me to improve my own nutrition readiness? Do I know where to go to find evidence-based online nutrition resources?
- Do I keep my personal nutrition beliefs to myself, allowing Service Members to make choices that align with their goals and values? Do I communicate consistent evidence-based nutrition practices over fads or trends?

Barriers to Consider

- Lack of formal nutrition training, confusion about nutrition facts versus fiction, or limited awareness of installation resources may lead to low confidence in modeling good nutrition practices.
- Operational and administrative duties often take precedence, leaving limited time to reinforce nutrition-focused behaviors.
- Unit culture may view nutrition discussions as low priority, hard to talk about, or not relevant, making leaders hesitant to engage.
- Strong personal beliefs, or extreme dietary practices, around nutrition may hinder a leader's ability to address the various needs of the force and get in the way of objective decision making.

Things You Can Do

- Model healthy eating behaviors by choosing [well-rounded](#), high-quality meals, taking time for food and water breaks, prioritizing home-cooked meals over eating out, and reinforcing responsible dietary supplement use.
- Use [credible resources](#) (such as HPRC, Military OneSource, and VA resources) and installation nutrition professionals (such as registered dietitians and nutrition care specialists) to answer nutrition-related questions, learn more about evidence-based nutrition strategies, and strengthen personal and team nutrition behaviors.

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- Avoid pushing personal nutrition beliefs or extreme dietary patterns on Service Members; instead, encourage them to safely optimize their nutrition readiness within the boundaries of their own values and resources.
- Foster a unit culture that values nutrition by integrating credible messages into team discussions, connecting nutrition to mission success, and normalizing performance nutrition as a core element of readiness. Focus on whole health and well-being, and communicate how nutrition is linked to mental, social, financial, and physical well-being.

Go to [page 15](#) to develop a targeted action plan to address this pillar.

For a list of virtual resources, see [Appendix](#).

CRITICAL PILLAR IN FOCUS:**Advance Informed Use of Dietary Supplements**

Dietary supplement use is common among Service Members, with motivations often related to performance enhancement rather than health and wellness. Unfortunately, the use of certain dietary supplements can pose significant health risks, impacting performance and mission readiness. Furthermore, some products may contain ingredients prohibited by the DoW, jeopardizing a Service Member's career. Military leaders can help reduce risks and enhance readiness by familiarizing themselves with [Operation Supplement Safety \(OPSS\)](#). OPSS is the program of record for everything related to dietary supplements, and amplifying educational initiatives designed to help Service Members make safe, informed decisions about dietary supplements.

Conversation Starters

- Do they (the Service Members) feel confident that their day-to-day meals provide what they need to perform and recover well?
- What barriers, if any, make it hard to get the nutrition they need from food first?
- What led them to consider taking a dietary supplement(s)? What is their goal?
- Where do they get most of their dietary supplement information from? How do they decide which supplements to trust? Do they know about OPSS?

Barriers to Consider

- Service Members may be hesitant to report supplement use due to lack of knowledge or fear of negative consequences. Additionally, extreme practices or dietary supplement use may be perceived as the "only way" to meet military standards.
- Marketing tactics in media or stores can be misleading and include exaggerated claims or offer military discounts targeting Service Members. Personnel may spend large sums of money on questionable products rather than on nutritious foods.
- Because mandatory pre-market supplement quality reviews do not exist, some products may be mislabeled, contaminated, or tainted with substances prohibited by the DoW.
- Although DoDI 6130.06, *Use of Dietary Supplements in the DoD*, prohibits retail facilities on military installations from selling products containing ingredients on the *DoD Prohibited Dietary Supplement Ingredients List*, there is no guarantee they don't contain potentially dangerous, hidden ingredients.

Things You Can Do

- Encourage all personnel to use the OPSS website to obtain helpful tools and resources, including evidence-based content, an Ask the Expert portal, the *DoD Prohibited Dietary Supplement Ingredients List*, ways to check the safety of dietary supplements, and mechanisms for reporting side effects of dietary supplements.
- Work with OPSS to provide dietary supplement education and training opportunities as outlined by DoDI 6130.06. Share key messages on supplement safety (available at [OPSS.org](#)), invite subject matter experts to brief on the subject during orientations, team huddles, and safety briefings, or participate in education and training events delivered by OPSS.

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- Assess the dietary supplement environment on base. Look for sources of misinformation, unethical marketing, or unvalidated peer advice. Identify key areas where OPSS graphics, resources, and information can be disseminated and displayed for Service Member use.
- Promote a “food-first” culture and model responsible use of dietary supplements. Use credible, evidence-based resources, check the *DoD Prohibited Dietary Supplement Ingredient List*, use the OPSS Scorecard to guide choices, and select products that are third party certified by a well-vetted third-party organization.

Go to [page 15](#) to develop a targeted action plan to address this pillar.

For a list of virtual resources, see [Appendix](#).

Leader-Inspired Nutrition Action Plan

1. Which pillar(s) will you focus on to improve your installation's nutrition culture?

Example: Promote a mission-ready food environment

2. Which subcategory(s) in the pillar assessment have the lowest scores? (Hint: This can be a great place to start implementing change.)

Example: "Service Members have protected meal times—and use them to eat and hydrate" was scored zero, never. "Healthy meal options are easily accessible to Service Members (within the workspace or across the installation or community)" was scored one, rarely.

3. What personal, unit, or mission outcomes do you observe due to these gaps or obstacles? Are there obvious reasons for these gaps or obstacles? How do these behaviors affect mission risk?

Example: Personnel rarely (if ever) take breaks from work to eat and hydrate. Personnel don't feel meal breaks are socially acceptable during work hours and feel too overwhelmed with work tasks to take breaks. Personnel often report high levels of fatigue and burnout, which may increase the risk of mistakes.

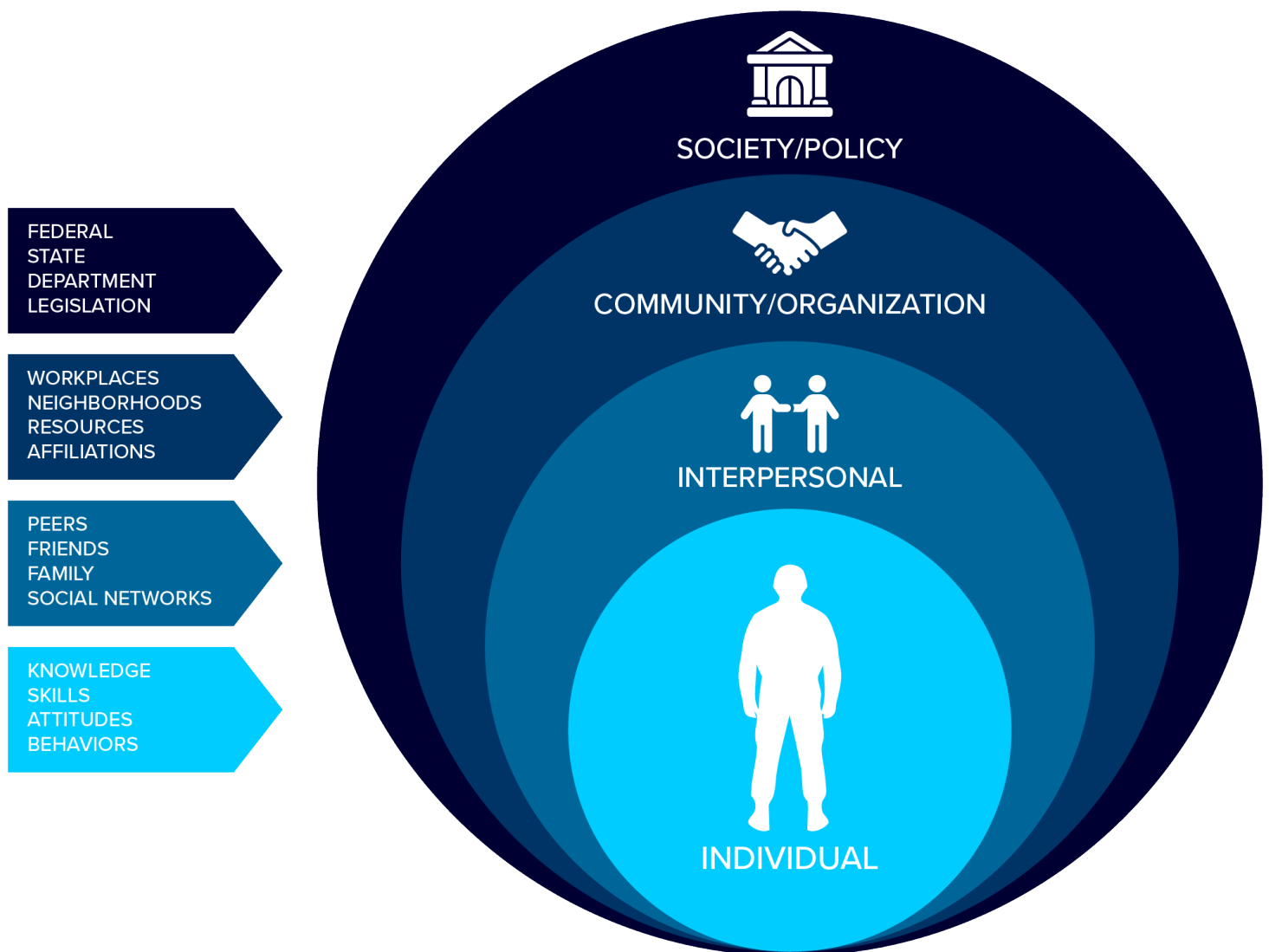
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Culture shifts are influenced by multiple, interconnected levels. For a culture to truly change, interventions must address each level, from personal beliefs to organizational policy. Using the social-ecological framework, and the guiding questions provided, consider what you can do at each level to strengthen your pillar(s) in focus. **This will be your action plan.**



4. **Individual:** What actions can you take to improve your pillar(s) in focus?

- How can you model behaviors that strengthen this pillar?
- What new knowledge or skills can you learn that strengthen this pillar?
- How can you integrate this pillar into your personal and professional goals?

Example: I will schedule 30-minute lunch breaks and eat the food I brought to work in common areas where personnel can see and talk with me. I will use credible resources, such as CHAMP's [HPRC](#) and [MNE](#) websites, to learn more about how nutrition affects my own operational performance and how the nutrition environment can affect operational readiness.

5. **Interpersonal and Relationship:** What can you do to support those around you to strengthen this pillar(s)?

- Are there training or resources available to help your peers strengthen this pillar?
- Does Command understand the scope of the problem and its effect on readiness?
- Can you take steps that promote new social norms that strengthen this pillar?

Example: I will invite the installation dietitian and first sergeant to the unit to discuss the current food environment and create a plan to improve accessibility. I will collect what I'm learning and develop a brief report for my chain of command.

6. Community and Organization: What can you do to strengthen this pillar(s) in your organization or community?

- Are there ongoing initiatives or lines of effort related to this pillar that you can amplify within your organization?
- How do your organization's metrics compare to regulations, standards, and benchmarks related to this pillar?
- Are there personnel or subject matter experts that you can invite into your organization to help you strengthen this pillar(s)?

Example: I will work with local nutrition and health promotion departments to collaborate on a formal mNEAT assessment of the organization to determine how current metrics relate to standards. I will print off some resources from the MNE website to post in unit break rooms.

7. Society and Policy: What policies, rules, or regulations can strengthen this pillar(s)?

- What policies relate to this pillar?
- Are there policies supporting this pillar that are not being followed?
- Do new policies or procedures need to be created to support this pillar?

Example: I will work with installation nutrition and food professionals to review policy related to the MNE to identify gaps, and help determine if new policies or regulations should be created to support this pillar.

The Way Forward

You now have an action plan to start changing your military nutrition culture through LIN strategies.

You alone can make great change. But don't forget to call on your team to support and amplify your work. Consider forming a tiger team of experts or like-minded individuals to support this process. Reach out to formal and informal leaders, build relationships with local nutrition and food experts, and collaborate with anyone you can. Finally, don't forget to set a date in your calendar to reassess the culture and celebrate your wins!

Appendix

Critical Pillar: Integrate Nutrition Education and Training

- [HPRC](#)
- [VA Teaching Kitchen](#)
- [Warfighter Nutrition Guide](#)
- [Military OneSource Nutrition & Fitness](#)

Critical Pillar: Promote a Mission-Ready Food Environment

- [mNEAT](#)
- [Military OneSource: Assessing Food Security](#)
- [Military OneSource: Support for Food, Finances & Housing](#)
- [Go for Green®](#)

Critical Pillar: Model Performance-Focused Nutrition Behaviors

- [Military Nutrition Environment: Messages for Leadership](#)
- [Nutritional Fitness: Messages for Leadership](#)
- [Performance Hydration: Messages for Leadership](#)
- [Supplement Safety: Message for Leadership](#)

Critical Pillar: Advance informed Use of Dietary Supplements

- [OPSS.org](#)
- [Supplement Safety: Messages for Leadership](#)
- [DoD Prohibited List](#)
- [DoDI 6130.06 Use of Dietary Supplements in the DoD](#)

LIN-Related Publications

- [Building a Culture of Health Through Leader-Inspired Nutrition](#)
- [Leader-Inspired Nutrition: A Framework for Promoting Healthy Nutrition Behaviors and a Nutritionally Fueled and Fit Military Force](#)
- [Leader-Inspired Nutrition: Promoting Safe Dietary Supplement Use for Service Members](#)