

## 5 Minutes on Family Readiness

By Cathy Speer

**If I had 5 minutes to talk with a new company commander on family readiness, this is what I would say . . .**

One of your jobs as a company commander is to help families become survivors in this strange Army world. To accomplish that, spouses must pull together as a group and support each other. This support network contributes to the general well being, morale, and esprit de corps of the entire unit. Many of the spouses' activities have a direct and favorable impact on the single Soldier as well and generally give the unit the feeling of being one large "family." As a result, the spouses are happier and more self-reliant, and the Soldiers remain satisfied with their chosen profession and commitment to their duties.

There is no perfect plan or concept for establishing a support network when you are working with military families. Many factors such as personalities, location, unit missions, time, and resources will determine the basic structure and function of any given group.

So how do you get a Family Readiness Group (FRG) going in your company or sustain one that was there when you took over? The key to a successful FRG is for you to project an attitude of concern for each of the Soldiers and families. The first thing you could do is write a letter and mail it to all the spouses introducing yourself, thanking them for their Soldiers' hard work, explaining your vision of family support, and telling them how they can help you accomplish the company's goals.

Here are some immediate questions that you might want to think about as you make family readiness fit into the plans that you have for the company:

- As the CO, how much do I need to get involved?
- Who runs the FRG?
- How many people need to be involved with the FRG, and what should the structure look like?
- How often do we need to have meetings, and who runs them?
- How do I keep the spouses informed of what is going on in the company and battalion, and how much do they need to know?
- Who maintains the rosters, and what should be on them?
- Do we need to have an FRG fund, and if so, who keeps the pot of money?

To be honest, unit family readiness is a full-time job. Creating and maintaining a wholesome, reassuring, and caring atmosphere among the spouses in any unit is hard work. The FRG begins at the top: the commander (at all levels) is responsible for the unit FRG. Does this mean that you have to run the FRG? No! Let the spouses run it. As the company commander you must believe in the unit's FRG and be 100% behind the efforts of those who are supporting it. Even though you are ultimately responsible for your FRG, you will get more "bang for your buck" if you empower the spouses with the authority to run it for you. So, whom do you get to run it for you?

Although there is a well-defined chain of command on the military side of the house, it is not so clear-cut for the spouses. Spouses are not in the Army nor do they have people working for them. You cannot "order" them to do something for you. You must ask someone to take the lead and run the group. Do not assume that a spouse will be willing to participate solely because of her/his Soldier's rank or position within the company.

Let's take two scenarios:

#1: You are married and your spouse wants to lead the FRG.

#2: You are single or your spouse does not want to be involved, and you must find someone to run it for you.

In scenario #1, your spouse can be in charge if she/he desires it. Chances are, your spouse is eager to be a part of the command team. Therefore, if your spouse wants to organize the FRG, then great! Now what happens if the last CO did not have a spouse or chose another spouse to take the lead with the FRG, and there is now a strong FRG in the company? What do you and your spouse do? First, your spouse has every right to take the leadership of the FRG because of your position in the company. How she/he goes about doing it is the key! Your spouse should meet with the current FRG leadership and discuss how the FRG is organized at present and how they can still work together if your spouse now assumes a leadership position. They can establish a co-leadership and share responsibilities. There are plenty of jobs out there in an FRG for everyone. Everyone just needs to work together!

In scenario #2, if you are single or your spouse chooses not to participate [which is perfectly ok!!!], you must find a spouse who is willing to assume the responsibilities of FRG leader. Select this person carefully. She/he will be your "link" at other functions and meetings and serve as leader of the spouses' group. Meet with her/him. Outline your expectations about her/his involvement and responsibilities in the company and FRG, how you will maintain communication with each other, and how she/he will keep you informed of the FRG's activities and concerns. Ask what she/he expects from you. Know from the beginning how much she/he is willing to do. Finally, empower this person to speak in your stead; publicly give this spouse the authority to be the FRG leader for you.

Your FRG organization can be formal (with a constitution and by-laws) or informal (FRG leader, Chairperson, etc.) or combination (President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer). It is important that the group decides the structure of the FRG, and there is agreement among the members what the responsibilities will be for the different positions.

There are many avenues you can use to communicate with the families. The variety and scope of activities are as endless as the imaginations and energy of the volunteers. Getting together socially gives spouses an opportunity to meet people and put names with faces. Successful communication will not occur without a lot of cooperation from many people. If you expect the FRG members to keep in contact with the spouses in the company, you are going to have to tell them who those spouses are, which means keeping rosters up to date with accurate information. Ask any FRG leader what the most frustrating thing is in being an FRG leader, and having accurate rosters will be at the top of the list. Spouses don't live in the company, so the FRG

leader is counting on you to provide the information. Develop a system that works for both of you, and then, make sure you fulfill your end of the bargain.

Here are some ways that you and the FRG leader can maintain communication with others in the company:

**TELEPHONE TREE.** A telephone tree is established in each company and is used to relay information quickly. It contains names and phone numbers of spouses within the company. Normally, the FRG leader will decide the best way to use the telephone tree. This roster is essential and must be constantly updated [at a minimum once a month]. Use the phone tree to relay important messages only. Since it is unrealistic to expect the FRG leader to call every spouse in the company, telephone callers are essential to make the telephone tree work. Of course, you need to set guidelines as to how to use the tree.

**PHONE CALLS.** Having the FRG members calling other spouses just to see how they are doing will probably be the best way to get others involved. It shows care and concern, and it also stops rumors and helps small problems to stay that way!

**HOME VISITS.** There are many benefits to visiting others in their homes. For a newcomer it warmly welcomes them into the company. It also lets them recognize a friendly face at a function. Many spouses are reluctant to come to activities because they don't know anyone. This is a great way to make them feel comfortable.

**UNIT NEWSLETTER.** A newsletter can be at battalion or company level. This vehicle makes a tremendous difference in the success of providing information. Often we cannot rely on the Soldiers to pass along information or flyers to their spouses. Printing and mailing a newsletter to each spouse in the company is a solution to that frustration. There are always spouses who choose not to participate in activities, and this is an ideal way to keep them informed of important information about the unit and community. Make sure you check with your local regulations concerning newsletters.

**FRG MEETINGS.** These are very beneficial to build group cohesiveness. These meetings can vary to include themes, crafts, and guest speakers. Everyone (officer spouses, NCO spouses, and enlisted spouses) should be invited to these meetings. This is the best opportunity for the spouses to get together on a smaller scale to form a bond with each other. There is no hard and fast rule about how to conduct these meetings. The FRG leader normally runs them. Should you and the 1SG attend? That is totally up to you. It would definitely show an interest on your part if you opened the meeting with any new information, answered questions, and then left! Some company commanders may think that being there the entire meeting is helpful or having the Soldiers there shows company unity, but if the spouses are honest, they would tell you that they would rather just be there among themselves without the military. See what works for you. Ideally, these meetings should be once a month. However, if your FRG leader is holding meetings monthly and no one is coming, then change the frequency of them to quarterly, or do away with them for awhile and just send out informational newsletters and try again at a later time.

**COMPANY EVENTS.** Each company FRG can chose its own activities, whether they be for all the Soldiers and their families, smaller get-togethers while the Soldiers are deployed, or parties for special events. One idea is for the company to have an open-house where the spouses can come to the company to see what the Soldiers actually do. Another way to build esprit is for the FRG to provide goodies and signs to welcome the Soldiers home after a deployment. Encourage the FRG to be creative. Remember to check with local regulations or JAG before undertaking a major event.

**ABOUT THE FRG INFORMAL FUND:**

There is a difference between the unit fund (managed by the military) and the FRG fund (managed by the FRG). Make sure you and your FRG leader understand the rules for maintaining this fund. There must be a designated person responsible for the funds, and preferably not the FRG leader or you. Make sure this person maintains a ledger for every expenditure, and that the expenditure is a group decision benefiting the entire group. Be smart about handling your FRG funds.

The needs of military families are unique and will continue to exist. They may differ from unit to unit and location to location, but they will always be there so long as we have families- particularly young families. It is not an easy job structuring and maintaining an effective support group. It requires continuous and dedicated teamwork by many individuals. At times it can be frustrating and seem like a thankless job. But there are many rewarding and gratifying times as well. Good luck!