

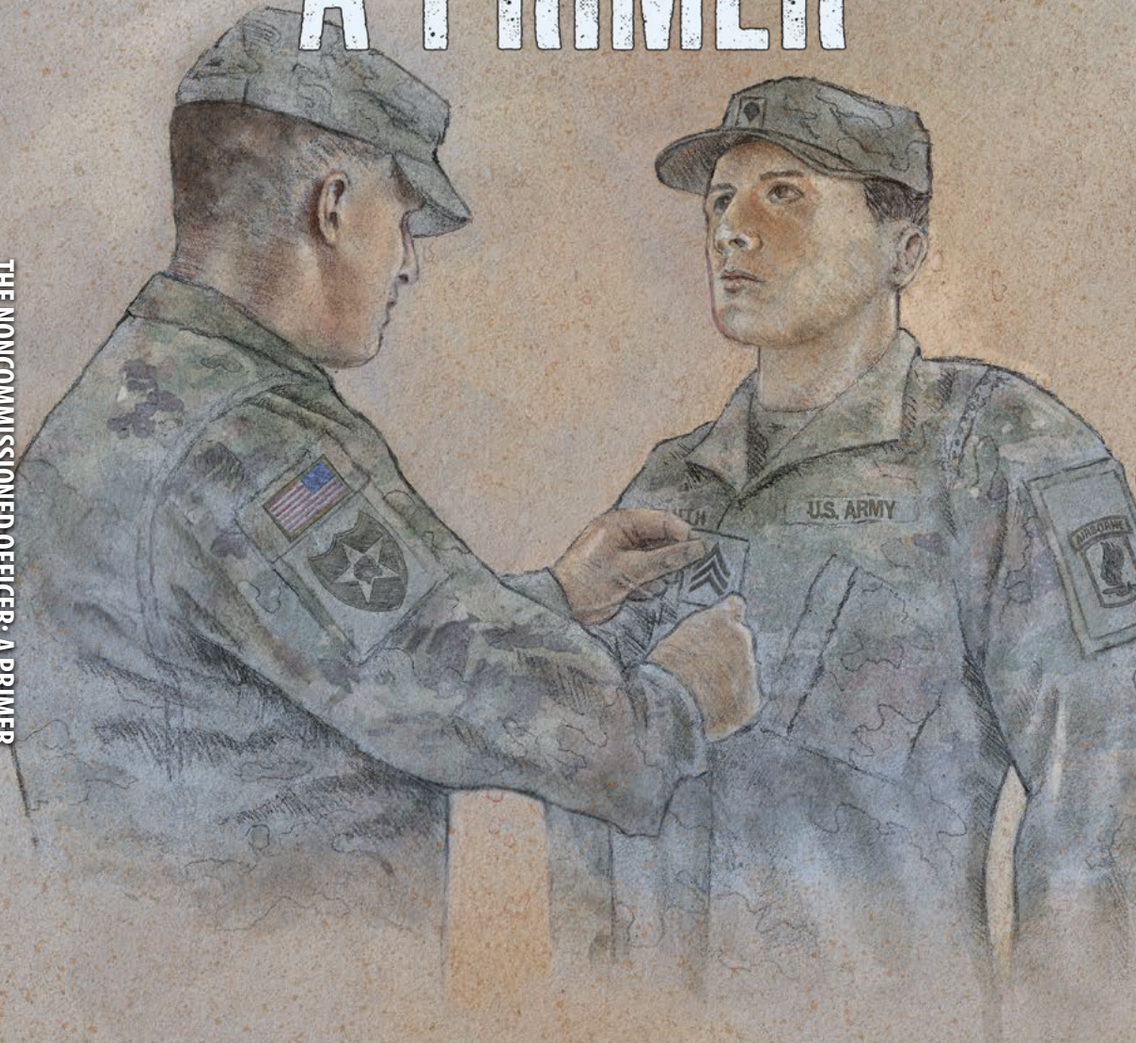
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Throughout *The Noncommissioned Officer: A Primer,* the authors supplement official army doctrine by blending those principles with historical context, professional insights, and personal anecdotes from experienced senior NCOs. The most effective NCOs are the ones who lead with empathy, communicate clearly, own their mistakes, and dedicate themselves to developing their soldiers while stewarding the values of the Army profession. Designed for junior and senior leaders, this volume weaves the personal experience against the policies and guidelines that informs daily operations and mission readiness. In doing so, readers see how strong NCOs are reared in practice. It is a choice. It is deliberate. And it is not without experiencing setbacks that allow for development and growth.

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THE NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER: A PRIMER



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Army University Press
US Army Combined Arms Center
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

By CSM (Ret.) Robert Nelson, Ed.D.
and CSM (Ret.) Richard J. Russell II

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The Noncommissioned Officer: A Primer

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Foreword

The strength of the United States Army has never rested solely in its equipment, its technology, or even its doctrine. It rests in its people—and more specifically, in the Noncommissioned Officer Corps that trains, leads, and cares for those people every day.

For more than two centuries, NCOs have served as the connective tissue of the Army. They translate intent into action, standards into discipline, and values into daily behavior. Whether in combat or in garrison, it is the NCO who ensures that units are ready, cohesive, and capable of accomplishing the mission under any conditions. That responsibility has not changed, but the environment in which NCOs operate continues to grow more complex, more decentralized, and more demanding.

Today's Army faces challenges that require disciplined initiative, adaptive leadership, and a deep understanding of both people and profession. In such an environment, doctrine alone is not enough. Leaders must understand how to apply it—how to lead in ambiguity, how to build trust, and how to develop others while accomplishing the mission. Just as importantly, they must understand the human dimension of leadership—the reality that how we lead people is just as critical as what we ask them to do. That is where this book makes an important contribution.

The Noncommissioned Officer: A Primer brings together the insights of experienced leaders who have lived the profession. It bridges the gap between doctrine and practice by offering perspective, context, and real-world application. The authors do more than explain what right looks like—they provide the "why" behind it, grounded in years of service and leadership. Their collective experience reinforces a fundamental truth: effective leadership is not learned through theory alone, but through reflection, application, and a commitment to continuous growth.

What makes this work particularly valuable is its accessibility. It speaks to NCOs at every stage of their development—those just beginning their journey and those serving in positions of greater responsibility. It reinforces the importance of standards, accountability, and professionalism, while also emphasizing the human dimension of leadership. At its core, this book is about people—how to lead them, develop them, and ultimately earn their trust.

The profession of arms demands more than competence; it demands character, presence, and intellect. It requires leaders who can think critically, act decisively, and remain grounded in the Army Values regardless of cir-

cumstance. The responsibility placed on NCOs is significant, but so is the impact they have on the success of their units and the future of the Army.

I encourage you to read this primer with an open mind and a willingness to reflect on your own leadership. Take the lessons offered here and apply them within your formations. Invest in your soldiers, enforce standards, and never lose sight of your responsibility—not only to lead today's soldiers, but to develop those who will lead tomorrow and to steward the profession for those who follow.

The Army will continue to evolve, but one thing remains constant—the Noncommissioned Officer Corps is, and will always be, the backbone of our Army.

Kenneth O. Preston
Sergeant Major of the Army (Retired)

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Preface

The character of combat is changing at a rapid pace. As our Army transforms to fight and win against near-peer adversaries, the margin for error is zero. We will operate in complex, contested, and decentralized environments where the decisive edge will not just be our technology. It will be the Noncommissioned Officer.

To meet the demands of tomorrow's battlefield, we must be uncompromising in our preparation. However, mastering our warfighting fundamentals is only half the equation. We must also master the elements of leadership.

The Noncommissioned Officer: A Primer acts as a guide to navigating the complex relationship between mission accomplishment and the welfare of our Soldiers. These are two tasks that are not competing priorities but deeply interwoven responsibilities. To develop tangible readiness and unlock the potential of the men and women in your formations, you must understand the human behavior behind the uniform.

We are the backbone. We earn that title, and it is a heavy responsibility that we must fulfill every day.

As you absorb these lessons, remember the generations of NCOs who forged the path before us and recognize your critical role in our legacy. The future of our Army depends on the leaders we develop today. Take this guide, lead from the front, and ensure our Soldiers are ready to fight and win wherever and whenever the Nation calls.

This We'll Defend.

Michael Weimer
Sergeant Major of the Army

Introduction: Be, Know, Do

Kate Dahlstrand, PhD

No one is more professional than I.
I am a Noncommissioned Officer, a leader of soldiers.

In the summer of 2006, I (Kate) spent weeks in Iraq pacing in the desert, memorizing the lines of the NCO Creed in preparation for an in-theater NCO-of-the-Year Board. As a young Sergeant, those words intimidated me. Now, decades later, I can look at the creed with experience and professional wisdom. Those opening lines were not designed to intimidate; they were meant to empower.

In the absence of clear guidance and directives, those 289 words provide a framework for maintaining military discipline. The creed also serves as a set of standing orders, reminding each NCO of their two basic responsibilities. Developing overall professionalism alongside technical and tactical competency, as the creed exhorts the NCO Corps to do, establishes a baseline of leadership to which all soldiers are entitled and can aspire. Empathetic practices and policies that encourage transparency throughout the ranks develop an organization capable of agility informed by integrity and moral courage.

Empowering young soldiers to grow into professional leadership positions is an explicit military directive. Providing junior noncommissioned officers with guidance on how to develop into leaders who facilitate military success is an important goal. Throughout Army doctrine, the concept of "Be, Know, Do" has provided a framework that recognizes holistic approaches to leadership. The Army Leadership Requirements Model (LRM) identifies the competencies and attributes needed by everyone in a leadership position, regardless of rank or role. "Be" represents the ideal of leading by example. "Know" represents what a leader exhibits through their attributes. "Do" offers the actionable qualities of a leader through competencies.

These basic doctrinal concepts as well as the foundational tenets of Army professional development, provide soldiers with a framework for performing and excelling in the absence of direct guidance. In August of 2025, TRADOC published an updated version of *The NCO Guide*, with Sergeant Major of the Army Michael R. Weimer reminding readers that, "Training and leading is what we do, and we do it better than anybody else." The chapters that follow have been designed to supplement the les-

sons in *The NCO Guide*, as well as provide advice and guidance in accessible language. The authors have been asked to reach into their personal professional wheelhouse to pull insights and lessons learned out of their careers and walk our readers through their collective experiences.

The chapters that follow were researched, written, and carefully measured by current and former noncommissioned officers for noncommissioned officers. It is informed by both doctrine and experience, offering a human interpretation of standard operating procedures. Dr. Robert F. Williams opens with a brief history of the US Army's Noncommissioned Officer corps in the first chapter that focuses on the evolution of roles and responsibilities, and the institutional actions that undergirded those evolutions. In the second chapter, 13th SMA Kenneth O. Preston and Dr. Kate Dahlstrand offer a contemporary overview of how the US Army uses NCOs today, how they were used during the Cold War, and how our allies and threats seek to replicate the successes of the American NCO.

Chapters 3-11, all joint authored by SGM (Ret.) Robert A. Nelson and SGM Richard J. Russell II, provide the supplemental stories and significance behind US Army doctrine and directives. As initially conceived, the chapters that follow put human experience and personal professional growth on display to communicate Army regulations and doctrine beyond the graphs, organizational charts, and bullet points of formalized government documents. Selected use of memoir "vignettes" throughout the body of work puts doctrine and rules into practice. Candid reflections of their careers offer intrinsic value in leadership. Nelson and Russell identify the human contribution to service and leadership, offering the "so what" behind guiding principles. While *The NCO Guide* and ADP 6-22 provide institutional knowledge, doctrine, and guidance, this primer supplements them with explanations of that knowledge, discussion and reflection of what it means in practice. Nelson and Russell engage their professional careers with honest and candid sincerity.

Finally, readers will find a few appendices located at the end of this book. The first one comes from the managing editor of *The NCO Journal*, Mr. Chago Zapata. The Army Civilian Professionals who work alongside those in uniform to research, write, amplify and publish the perspectives of soldiers in the AUP office hope that this primer invites you, the reader, to join the conversation. Continue the dialogue of your chosen profession. Following the appeal, contributors to this manuscript solicited senior NCOs throughout today's army to answer "frequently asked questions" which have collected and arranged here. NCOPD and LPD recommendations are pro-

vided in Appendix C, and finally, a reading list has been provided for noncommissioned officers that can be consulted throughout a military career.

As the manuscript developed over the last few years the story behind the origin of this project has become a fundamental contributing factor for why support behind it has grown. One of the trends readers will note throughout this primer is the stress and importance placed on transparency. In that spirit, the following story is meant to illustrate the sincere belief in the power of a strong NCO Corps. In 1999, I (Kate) was a young enlisted soldier and a combat medic stationed with the 296th FSB, 3 BDE, 2 ID, at (then) Fort Lewis, Washington. Staff Sergeant Rob Nelson came into my organization when I was a Private First Class. It was before 9/11. We were serving a peacetime US Army, and SSG Nelson taught me through his actions and words what a good NCO ought to bring to the human dimension of leading soldiers. I witnessed and benefitted from a platoon sergeant who checked in on his single soldiers during holidays, who identified potential in young soldiers and facilitated their professional development, and who followed through on both celebration and consequences for a soldier's actions.

Over twenty years later, far removed from my active-duty days, I had used my educational benefits to earn a PhD in American history; I research and write about American soldiers throughout history and their transition back to civilian life after military service. In 2020, I found my dream job, amplifying and publishing the scholarship of soldiers, for soldiers, when I accepted a position as the managing editor for the Research & Books team for Army University Press (AUP) located in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. AUP also publishes *The NCO Journal*. In 2022, my colleague and managing editor of *The NCO Journal* briefed a pending publication, a co-authored essay entitled "The Understated Art of Knowing When to ST*U" by Sgt. Maj. Robert Nelson & Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Gabriel Arnold. That headline was something that could only have come from my former platoon sergeant.

The US Army is a small world and the longer you continue to serve in it or adjacent to it meaningful connections will inevitably resurface in sometimes delightful and serendipitous ways. I immediately reached out to SGM Nelson on LinkedIn, asking if he remembered me and let him know how much I enjoyed reading his article. From there, a meeting was scheduled, and I gauged his interest in writing a book for NCOs for Army University Press. I asked him to write a book for the noncommissioned officer, a primer, that uses effective narration and storytelling informed by professional experience. I asked him to lift the veil and demystify the contributions NCOs make to mission command and military successes.

I am eternally grateful my former platoon sergeant agreed. Both for the need of such a primer, but also to be a heavy contributor to its creation. SGM Nelson introduced his writing partner at Fort Bliss, SGM Richard J. Russell II, to my team here at Fort Leavenworth. We came together for regular meetings, building an organizational framework and outline for a book-length project that sought to engage enlisted leaders and offer advice on navigating a successful career that acknowledges and understands where NCOs fit within the US Army mission and how to make their service a combat multiplier.

Chapter 1

A Brief History of the Noncommissioned Officer and Professional Development

Robert F. Williams, Ph.D

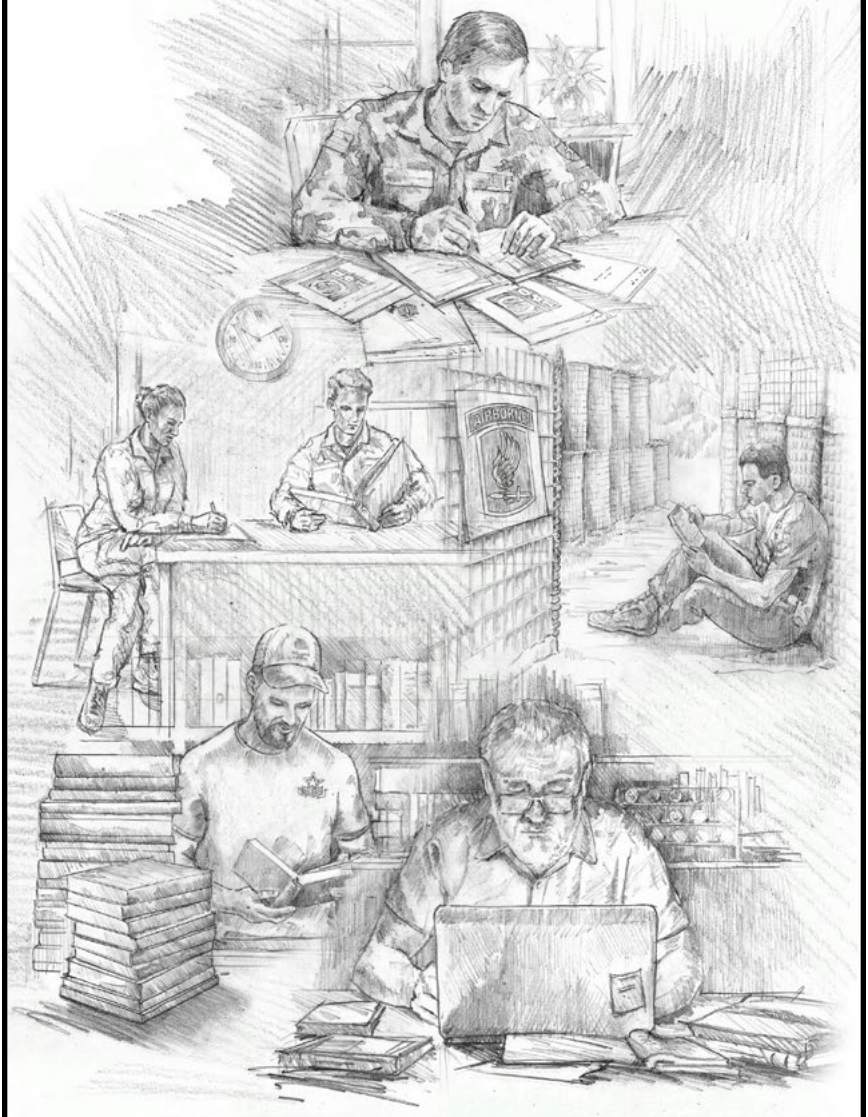


Figure 1.1. For the NCO Corps, by NCOs. Dale Cordes, untitled, 2026, graphite on paper, Lawrence, Kansas.

The American non-commissioned officer is a member of a time-honored corps dating back centuries. Noncommissioned leaders have long played an essential role in training, leading, mentoring, and instilling discipline in military formations. The roles and responsibilities of the noncommissioned officer have evolved but remain rooted in stewarding the profession and taking care of soldiers. As these roles changed, the modern US Army NCO has enjoyed incredible latitude to accomplish their mission with minimal guidance. They are the backbone of the US Army, handling its day-to-day operations. They carry out complex tactical missions, make critical decisions, and work across multiple echelons and agencies, including with allies and partners. NCOs are also responsible for maintaining standards and discipline across the force. NCOs wear many hats: trainers, mentors, advisors, and communicators all rolled into one. These leaders are involved in every part of a soldier's life in the Army.

Every soldier has a sergeant to guide them. Every soldier deserves a leader who knows how to train them well, can be trusted, cares about their health, and helps them grow into future leaders. Throughout the history of the United States Army, the non-commissioned officer has been the leader most closely associated with the common soldier. They are the ones dealing with the day-to-day minutia of soldiering. Rather than chronicling every detail of NCO history, this is a story about the evolution of the NCO's role over time. The non-commissioned officer has come a long way from feudal Europe to the decentralized, empowered leader they are today for the United States Army.

European Origins

The term sergeant comes from the Latin *serviens*—or servant. These were lesser officers in the medieval feudal period, a step below the armored Knight who fought for a land bounty. Until the reign of Louis XIV, men from various socio-economic backgrounds competed to be sergeants. During Louis XIV's reign (1638–1715), nobles used their riches to purchase commissions; thus, men with no means could only pursue careers as *sous officers.* As such, over the 18th Century across Europe, the schism between commissioned and noncommissioned officers grew. This schism helped solidify the commissioned officer class as an aristocracy coming from the gentry and nobility, while noncommissioned officers were from among the commoners. The schism formed along clear lines between those who dealt directly with the soldiers and those who did not.[1]

Changes in warfare in the early modern period brought essential changes to the organization and structure of armies. As infantry forma-

tions evolved to include more commoners in formations with pikes, particularly in Switzerland in the late 18th Century, warfare required a more disciplined soldiery. They needed sergeants who were experts in drill to train soldiers and keep them in formation during battle. From there, the sergeant and corporal, according to the historian Ernest F. Fisher, "became the pillars upon which…the battleworthiness of a military unit rested."[2] The NCO was to train soldiers, keep them supplied, and keep them in formation during battle.

The American NCO developed from the Prussian military system and the English militia system.[3] Traditions on the German side can be traced to Frederick Wilhelm I, Frederick the Great's father, and two documents. One was a memorandum prepared for Frederick the Great by Prince Leopold I of Anhalt-Dessau, and the other was Frederick Wilhelm's NCO regulations, published in March 1726. General Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, instrumental in developing the first American noncommissioned officers, would have known both. The king, Frederick Wilhelm I, required every noncommissioned officer in the Prussian service to carry a leather-bound copy of the 1726 *Regulations for Noncommissioned Officers of Infantry*. If they lost their copy, they were "reduced to private and sentenced to three years' imprisonment at hard labor." In the Prussian tradition, the senior NCO in the company, today's first sergeant in the US Army, was *die Mutter der Kompanie* ("the mother of the company"). This title reflected the need for NCOs not to be brutal disciplinarians but to have steadfast and honest character, with humanity and patience to train and teach.[4]

By contrast, British settlers in America brought a different military tradition based on local militias. Every able-bodied man was expected to own weapons and serve in his community's militia. These militias were then organized into small squads, each led by an NCO. This structure was well-suited for dealing with Native American tactics and the challenging terrain of the New World.[5] As a result, colonial NCOs had more opportunities to show initiative and leadership. These militia units could combine into larger forces for specific campaigns as needed, and this flexible system proved effective in helping British troops defeat the French in Canada and defend against Spanish threats along the southern colonial borders. Concurrently, this approach gave American NCOs more responsibility and autonomy than their European counterparts.[6]

The American Revolution

During the American Revolution, NCOs played a crucial role in drilling and disciplining troops and leading small units in battle within the

Continental Army. General Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, a Prussian military officer, significantly shaped the development of the American noncommissioned officer corps during this period. Appointed as Inspector General of the Continental Army in 1778, von Steuben introduced a standardized drill and training system emphasizing discipline, hygiene, and marksmanship. He wrote the "Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States," also known as the "Blue Book," which became the standard drill manual for the Continental Army.[7]

Von Steuben recognized the importance of NCOs in maintaining discipline and order within the ranks. He established a transparent chain of command and defined the roles and responsibilities of NCOs, such as Sergeants and Corporals. For the Continental Army, NCOs had tasks that would look familiar to NCOs in the 21st Century: drilling soldiers, inspecting equipment, and maintaining proper hygiene. Von Steuben's most notable contribution, however, came during the 1777-1778 winter encampment at Valley Forge, where, through drill, he helped turn the continentals from a ragtag group into something resembling a professional army amid harsh conditions and limited resources. Von Steuben emphasized selecting qualified and competent individuals for NCO positions based on merit, skill, and leadership potential rather than social class or wealth. This emphasis on merit-based promotion laid the foundation for developing a career NCO corps in the US Army.[8]

The New Republic

In November 1791, a 2,000-man force led by Arthur St. Clair was destroyed at the Wabash River by an allied Native American force led by Little Turtle (Miami) and Blue Jacket (Shawnee). A significant reason for the defeat was the ineptitude due to a lack of training and professionalism in that force.[9] This defeat led Congress to authorize recruitment and increase the number of noncommissioned officers in the Army. President George Washington appointed Revolutionary War General Anthony Wayne to lead the new "Legion of the United States." Wayne prioritized discipline and training, treating NCOs as professionals who warranted a separate punishment system from that used for privates. In separating the NCO, Wayne further professionalized the NCO corps, which contributed to Wayne's victory at the Battle of Fallen Timbers and the pacification of the Northwest.[10]

One member of Wayne's force at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, Captain William Clark, co-led an expedition in 1803. The Lewis and Clark Expedition featured five non-commissioned officers, four sergeants, and

one corporal. Those NCOs helped care for the twenty-three privates, eight civilians, and one enslaved man who went on the journey west. One of the sergeants, Sgt. Charles Floyd, died of disease. He had the distinction of being the first American soldier to die West of the Mississippi.[11]

Into and after the War of 1812, the role of the NCO remained that of keeping the order and good conduct of the company. This emphasis on the administrative role remained after the US Army adopted Napoleonic doctrine in the early 19th Century. The regimental commander selected NCOs—a practice that continued into the First World War. Corporals were deputy sergeants charged with the overall cleanliness of the men and issued morning reports on the men's status and equipment. Like modern staff duty, sergeants within each company also performed orderly duties, assisting the officer of the day, per a duty roster prepared by the regimental sergeant major. Tactically, sergeants were still primarily responsible for maintaining discipline under fire and orderly, precise movements from march to battle formations. The French system adopted under Winfield Scott's manual enhanced the role of the NCO as more of a critical assistant to the officers than a tactical leader. Nevertheless, these regulations governed the Army into the beginning of the American Civil War.[12]

Between the War of 1812 and the Civil War, the Army was small, spread thin, and never at full strength. In June 1853, for example, the Army authorized 12,821 soldiers. It had only 10,417 on its rolls, 8,342 of which were stationed on the western frontier, and 6,918 were at their posts.[13] It was also comprised of many foreign-born recruits, many of them from Ireland or Germany. The proportion of foreign-born recruits in the regular Army was as high as 57 percent by the 1850s, and that rose even higher by the Civil War, in which many units were entirely German or Irish. During this period, the Army's primary function was nation-building and protecting settlers moving West. Typical garrison life consisted of drill, guard duty, care and feeding of animals, maintenance of facilities, fatigue labor, and the occasional escort or scouting duty. This reality gave commanders, on average across the force, 124 men with which to conduct operations.[14]

The American Civil War

When the US Army expanded to put down the slaveholder rebellion in 1861, NCOs, like today, served as the backbone of the Army. At the outbreak of war, the regular Army consisted of only 16,000 men, up from the 11,000 a few years before, but not enough. Congress raised the end

strength of the Army to 22,714 in the summer of 1861, which meant that hundreds of regular soldiers were promoted to noncommissioned officers. Eventually, 700,000 men enlisted as volunteers, and more than 2.6 million people served in the US Army during that war. Some former regular army NCOs who had left the service before the war found themselves prized leaders for their experience and knowledge. They would serve in the more than 450 volunteer units raised during the war. While many famous officers turned their backs on their oaths and joined the rebels, the crises were less severe for enlisted regulars, who were locked into the regular Army by contact and for whom resignation was not possible.

In the Army of the 19th Century, there were three types of noncommissioned officers: those who served as junior leaders and a buffer between officers and men, clerks and orderlies who did most of the paperwork, and old-time leaders who were given jobs as ordnance sergeants at the multiple posts around the country.[15] NCOs maintained their traditional role as administrative experts and trainers. The first sergeant was still responsible for the company descriptive book, which was the living, breathing soul of the unit. They served tactically as unit guides, maintaining the order and alignment of formations. However, throughout the war, and especially in the Western theater, NCOs led small units in expanded skirmisher formations more akin to modern infantry maneuvers than the linear tactics often portrayed in popular representations of that war.[16]

These NCOs had to rely on the training manuals available, with new ones published in 1854, 1855, and again in 1862.[17] Much of the infantry fighting was performed using Brig. Gen. Silas Casey's 1862 manual *Infantry Tactics.*[18] Part of Casey's instructions suggested less vulnerable tactical formations of skirmishers where a senior noncommissioned officer might oversee a unit as large as a platoon. Their role was to "see that the men economize their strength, keep cool, and profit by all the advantages the ground may offer for cover."[19] Regular and volunteer units had NCOs, with those in volunteer units typically more educated than those from regular units as volunteer units had to train their own NCOs and officers who were often elected from within the pool of local volunteers to that unit. Nevertheless, regular and volunteer noncommissioned officers performed the same duties, and the Civil War did much to cement the role of the NCO as a tactical, small-unit leader.[20]

Reconstruction and Indian Wars

After the Civil War, Congress reduced the Army to below pre-war levels. Yet, it was responsible for nation-building duties in the South and West. Because the country had its Army spread so thin, NCOs took on

increased importance in leading small units. The noncommissioned officer corps of the post-Civil War army was an eclectic blend that included former rebel commissioned officers, veterans of the Civil War, and some even with service as far back as the Mexican War. They became what historian Ernest Fisher called "the archetype of the tough old sarge" during this period.[21] While many sergeants and corporals lived up to that stereotype, NCOs were also known for brutality and neglect, which contributed to the high desertion rates throughout the period. According to August Kautz's manual governing soldier and NCO behavior, the Army's NCOs reiterated that the regimental commander selected NCOs. But being tough was not the same as being out of control. As Kautz's manual implored: "The confidence of the soldiers in the integrity of a noncommissioned officer can only be obtained by his being rigidly just and impartial to those under him, and by keeping his temper on all occasions, and discharging his duty without passion or feeling." Nonetheless, a failure to obtain his soldiers' respect and obedience was seen as a failure of the NCO's most basic duty.[22]

Doctrine centered on Emory Upton's updated 1867 manual *Infantry Tactics*, and within, Upton emphasized simplicity in maneuver, which NCOs could teach more quickly to their troops. He also emphasized flexibility by prescribing that units move in two groups of "fours," which were squads of eight, that became the basic unit in his infantry system. Much like the fire team of the 21st Century, these groups replaced platoons and sections in earlier drill manuals. This change was not yet the end of close-order tactics, which remained in effect until the First World War but led to a much more flexible version after introducing the rapid-fire rifle. The squad of Upton's manual could not maneuver independently; they existed mainly to control fire and movement.[23] Reorganizing in such a manner was crucial in cementing the NCO's tactical role as a small-unit leader, even if the training was, as the historian Robert Utley said, "more a hope than a reality" due to the wide dispersion of units on the frontier.[24]

Fighting various Native American groups across the American West facilitated prompt change. The tactical theory of the day emphasized small-unit leaders taking the initiative. Skirmish formations and open-order drills quickly gained precedence, and some theorists foresaw an increased role for the noncommissioned officer. Officers realized this and, in an updated drill regulations for 1891, published by the Army (rather than previous manuals published by individual officers under their name), codified the idea of a squad of two "fours" consisting of one corporal and seven privates. This squad formed the basis of the Army's loose-order tactics and significantly increased the influence of the NCO in combat.[25]

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth Century, the NCOs maintained their role as company administrators, responsible for discipline and punishment.[26] They were expected to be cool and collected in high-stress situations. One such situation arose in Hays City, Kansas, where white civilians looted the homes of some Black residents. When a detail of 5th Infantry and 7th Cavalry troops arrived, one sergeant quickly identified the source of the problem—a single rabble-rouser on top of a building inciting the riot—and drew a bead on him with his rifle, ready to fire on his officer's command. It was unnecessary, and the crowd dispersed soon after the troops arrived. The incident demonstrated the calmness required of noncommissioned officers in high-stress situations. Regardless, the nature of a small army at numerous posts across the expanses of the West made for a tight-knit group. As one officer in the 5th Infantry described them in 1878, NCOs were "the bone and sinew of the regiment."[27] These units, sleeping in Spartan sleeping quarters where the corporals slept with the men and the sergeants nearby, helped develop a familial relationship in which the first sergeant stood as the matriarch of the company. He was like the foreman of a company, managing everything on a day-to-day basis.[28] He maintained the family bible—the descriptive book—and was chief advisor to the captain on all matters pertaining to the soldier.[29]

Until World War II, no standardized promotions, permanent change of station moves, or NCO professional development career maps existed. Training and education were the responsibility of the unit. These manifested themselves in the "school of the soldier" and the "school of the company," which referred to unit-level training programs for the individual and the collective. NCOs stayed in the same regiment, likely with the same officers and men, for years and sometimes decades. Except in rare cases, if an NCO transferred units, they were reduced in rank to private.[30] Likewise, the American NCO had little formal, professional education. Aside from schools for technical careers such as the artillery, medical, and signal services, the infantry and cavalry relied on ad hoc, on-the-job training to raise and develop competent noncommissioned officers. By the 1890s, many officers, after observing European armies, believed the US Army needed a similar professional education system for all its NCOs. Emory Upton was particularly impressed with the German system. Yet, a debate emerged on establishing a centralized, permanent school in the United States or a decentralized system that relied on the individual NCO and his command. Most company-grade officers believed they knew their men's capabilities better than the rest of the Army and were much better suited to training their personnel. Others wanted formal schooling in such diverse subjects as elementary mathematics, science, mechanical drawing,

surveying, and engineering. No changes were implemented until after the turn of the Century, and the NCO corps performed admirably during the Spanish-American War despite multiple institutional-level difficulties.[31]

NCOs for Empire

Between the turn of the Century and World War I, the US Army participated in overseas contingency operations in China and the Philippines, resulting in the first-ever overseas garrison of American troops. This became especially difficult for NCOs, considering the army policy that they would not maintain their rank if moved to a different regiment. Therefore, NCOs were compelled to either stay overseas or leave the service. To help rectify the issue, the Army enacted a small policy change in 1908, but only for senior noncommissioned officers to keep their grades if they moved to different units.[32]

Handbooks and doctrine continued to emphasize the role of the NCO and described their duties in garrison and the field. They were official manuals from the War Department that finally superseded privately printed training manuals issued in 1914 and 1917. The US Army outlined the NCO's role as assisting the company's officers but gave little autonomy. Nevertheless, the First Sergeant remained at the apex and had to be chosen from the line sergeants of the company for his intelligence and military bearing, among other traits. In many units, the First Sergeant was like an all-powerful being; good ones ran their companies by the book and with rigid discipline.[33] The 1917 *Manual for Noncommissioned Officers and Privates of Infantry of the Army of the United States* and its predecessor were widely distributed in the decentralized American tradition. It soon became apparent, however, that on-the-job training and self-study were insufficient for creating a large National Army ready to take on the Germans on the Western Front in World War I.[34]

World War I

When the United States entered the First World War, then raging on the European continent, the Army worked closely with the professional armies of European allies for the first time. Cooperation was everywhere, from liaisons to the thousands of French and British trainers descending upon American units to prepare them for combat. It also revealed to the allied nations and US leaders that the American NCO was deficient in many areas compared to his British and French counterparts, to say nothing of the impressive German *Unteroffizier*. French and British trainers in the United States expressed considerable doubt about whether the American NCO would perform well in combat. Allied NCOs had

much greater prestige and status, giving them more authority than the American NCOs, who were not given the same importance and status. Also, there was an expectation that NCOs would lead in the absence of officers, which happened often thanks to the high casualty rates among company-grade officers throughout the First World War. Once the fighting started, NCOs were essential in leading troops in trench warfare and adapting to new technologies such as machine guns and tanks. Yet the eight-man squad of Upton's manual and the flexible version of close-order tactics remained. The Army also changed the status of NCOs so that they could transfer units without losing their grade, further adding to the prestige of the noncommissioned officer.[35]

In April 1918, General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, recognized the crucial role of noncommissioned officers in modern warfare. After observing the difference between American and Allied noncoms, Pershing wrote to the Secretary of War to propose ideas to expand his NCO's noncommissioned officers' training, responsibility, and prestige. His recommendations were based on the bleak reality that NCOs often replaced wounded or killed commissioned officers under fire. Pershing suggested special schools to standardize training and separate messes to differentiate noncommissioned officers from enlisted men. Within weeks, the Secretary approved Pershing's proposals. Training shifted to instill American sergeants with "the habit of command." The idea was to enable them to step into officer roles when necessary. The Army implemented these changes post-haste. However, the innovations were limited to the overseas American Expeditionary Forces rather than Army-wide and, as such, had little impact on the army.[36]

The most crucial tactical lesson from the Western Front was the importance of small-unit actions. European armies had learned this lesson through devastating campaigns across France that had resulted in massive casualties. Survivors of these battles learned to avoid large formations. Instead, small teams, typically led by NCOs, learned to use terrain and environmental conditions to their advantage while providing covering fire for nearby units, much like modern maneuvering fire teams. Pershing insisted that American forces adopt these tactics as well and emphasized the role of NCOs as small-unit leaders, that they can often decide a battle by their sheer initiative and boldness in action.[37]

The exploits of Corporal Alvin York, an Appalachian American from Pall Mall, Tennessee, are among the most prominent examples of an NCO taking initiative under fire. On 8 October 1918, York was trying

to knock out German maxim machine gun positions as part of a seventeen-man patrol from Company G, 328th Infantry Regiment, 82nd Infantry Division. One of York's sergeants led the patrol, as York was still a corporal. In their initial contact, they took multiple German prisoners, who yelled to their comrades on the machine guns for help. York's platoon leader was already dead, and the ensuing machine-gun fire killed his patrol leader and wounded the other NCOs, so York took charge. In the ensuing firefight, York took on the enemy machine gun, defeated the enemy attack, and eliminated the machine gun position. Rather than lose any more men, the German commander on site surrendered his unit to York and his men. In all, York brought 132 German prisoners back to American lines, as well as the remaining eight members of his patrol. He was promoted to sergeant and later awarded the Medal of Honor and French *Croix de Guerre* for that action.[38]

Although Pershing's wartime initiatives did not continue after demobilization, the exceptional performance of many NCOs during the war's final months demonstrated the value of his reforms. As warfare continued to evolve throughout the 20th Century, with advancements in weapons and tactics, the role of the NCO grew increasingly important, reflecting the ongoing significance of effective small-unit leadership in modern military operations.[39]

Interwar NCOs

The 1920s and 30s were a period of regression for the status of noncommissioned officers. This shift was partly due to the downsizing of the Army after World War I. It was also partly due to the chaotic nature of the enlisted grade structure, which by 1919 had included more than twenty different grades and ranks. As such, throughout the interwar period, the Army expanded the warrant officer ranks to account for administrative and technical duties and created specialist positions in the lower grades that carried additional pay but no increased rank or authority. The significant change was the establishment of seven standard grades for all enlisted personnel regardless of specialty: private, private first class, corporal, sergeant, staff sergeant, first sergeant or technical sergeant, and master sergeant. Nevertheless, on the eve of World War II, the US Army had a weakened NCO corps that had been reduced in status from its height in World War I. Once again, the difficulties of combat, coupled with the reality that the Army needed leaders at all echelons, forced change.[40]

Throughout the interwar years, the so-called "backbone of the Army" was invisible at the highest levels. Between 1927 and 1941, no mention

was made of noncommissioned officers in the Secretary of War's annual reports. This omission reflected the long-standing American military tradition of only referring to two elements—officers and men—rather than acknowledging the existence and importance of NCOs. In doing so, the US Army gave the noncommissioned officers no special status, seeing them only as enlisted men temporarily elevated to a higher rank at the will of their officer. It was also part of the American tradition of disdain for standing militaries and, therefore, the idea of professional NCOs. This attitude contrasted with other European militaries, who considered themselves composed of noncommissioned officers and men.[41]

World War II and Prestige Worldwide

World War II impacted important developments within the NCO Corps. The Army rapidly grew from 17,000 to 227,000 after the Germans invaded Poland in September 1939. In September 1940, Congress authorized a 370,000-soldier regular army to be raised through the first peacetime draft in US history. Further, the War Department planned to have an army of one million in October 1941 with plans for two million by January 1942, and four million by April 1942.[42] Mobilization in World War II involved nearly 25 percent of the nation's manpower—almost double the 13.6 percent engaged in World War I. This extensive mobilization led to a concomitant increase in the number of NCOs and inflation in the grade structure. The infantry squad's expansion from eight to twelve soldiers created further structural changes emblematic of the entire force. The squad leader's position was elevated to sergeant. In contrast, the corporal, previously the squad leader, became second-in-command and a fire-team leader.[43]

The changing character of warfare in World War II required more technical specialists to operate and maintain them. To manage these new technical skill sets, the Army introduced a Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) system that used three-digit numbers to identify the individual's skills and placed them where needed.[44] The MOS system also had significant drawbacks. It struggled to identify individuals with the qualities necessary to be good noncommissioned officers. The system became overly complex and led to an abundance of technical specialists. Because these specialists received NCO status, a typical rifle company had only one private first class and seventeen privates, while everyone else held NCO rank. This situation placed an undue burden of work details and guard duty on a diminishing number of soldiers. To address this, in late 1943, Army leadership revoked the NCO status of technicians even though they would continue to wear the letter T under their NCO chevrons and receive pay corresponding to enlisted grades 3, 4, and 5. These "techs," though some-

times the subject of jokes, proved essential to the war effort.[45] Technicians were important in the services of supply, especially as medics, radio operators and repairmen, mail clerks, mechanics, cooks, and musicians, but did not have the same roles and responsibilities as noncommissioned officers.

One of the most significant changes during World War II was the ability of noncommissioned officers to transfer to other units within the Army. This was a crucial change in an army that expanded quickly and needed to move experienced, noncommissioned men around to train the millions of draftees. By 1943, all transfers were made in grade as the wartime situation supplanted long-standing traditions thanks to the need to spread leaders and expertise across the growing Army.[46] The large influx of new NCOs, drafted, trained, and promoted during the intense mobilization of 1942 and 1943, played a crucial role in the war. These citizen-soldiers admirably performed their duties as noncommissioned officers across all fronts during World War II. Small-unit leadership was critical in every theater of the war, from the jungle warfare of New Guinea to the Hürtgen Forest battle in Europe. Warfare in World War II highlighted the challenges of rapid military expansion and the vital importance of adaptable, skilled NCOs in modern warfare.

NCOs took on increased responsibilities, such as leading platoons and companies in the absence of commissioned officers. NCOs also earned most of the Medals of Honor awarded during the war. Of the 195 Medals of Honor awarded to enlisted men, 100 went to NCOs and 95 to privates. This is compared with 67 earned by commissioned officers. Of those 100, only nine were earned by regular NCOs who had served since before the war. The overwhelming majority were earned by NCOs who entered the service after 1940. This fact speaks to the overall expansion of the NCO corps and the relegation of the older noncoms to training and teaching duty. War is, after all, a young person's game, and the most prominent prewar NCOs were aging and found their best service in preparing the younger generation to lead tactical units.[47] Rapid promotions during the war, alongside the expansion of the technical ranks, brought about challenges in career management. NCOs were naturally more inclined to continue their military service than lower-ranking soldiers, and as such, despite a massive demobilization process, the ranks of NCOs remained disproportionately large.[48]

Cold War Professionalization

While the Army had incorporated leadership training into unit preparation during the war, Army leadership recognized the need for standardized

NCO training across the service, as many lacked the skills required for their new roles. In response, the Army created new education institutions like the Lido Training Center in Italy (1945) and the Constabulary School in Sonthofen, Germany (1946). The Seventh Army Noncommissioned Officers Academy in Munich, established by Brigadier General Bruce C. Clarke in 1949, became particularly well-known as it was the first to be devoted to NCO professionalization.[49] After World War II, NCO academies expanded across the Army.[50] However, these new institutions faced numerous challenges: inconsistent selection criteria, curricula, instructional quality, and course durations due to inadequate central guidance. And to top it off, despite the high demand for NCOs, attendance at NCO Academies was optional for promotion. As such, most NCOs never attended; instead, they continued to rely on traditional on-the-job training for their development.[51] Nevertheless, this early phase of NCO education laid the groundwork for a more standardized, professional education system that followed later wars.[52]

Meanwhile, there was an overall decline in readiness across the army thanks to the rapid demobilization of the eight million-strong citizen army fielded for World War II. To help combat that, in 1949, the Army rolled out a new Career Guidance Program to provide "a broadly qualified, well-rounded, noncommissioned" corps to fill critical shortages in times of emergency. It was a career map akin to something the officers of the period followed, outlining successive assignments toward promotion. According to noncommissioned officer turned historian Tom Hanson, the program emphasized "universal" officers and NCOs and "diluted what little institutional memory of combat remained in the US Army after 1947."[53] Nearly every unit across the Army lacked requisite NCOs. For example, in 1949, the 34th Infantry Regiment reported having only 29 of 59 authorized Master Sergeants, 89 of 158 Sergeants First Class, 152 of 258 Staff Sergeants, and 359 of the required 582 sergeants. This shortage of noncoms was typical across the Eighth Army in the Far East and the rest of the Army. Without these NCOs performing their traditional functions, meaningful preparation was impossible, and unit effectiveness suffered at the war's outset.[54]

The lack of NCOs was readily apparent in the opening months of the Korean War. Stateside NCOs at various training centers were levied for quick overseas service to compensate for shortages in Korea, which left their previous units understaffed.[55] Meanwhile, the arduous terrain in Korea necessitated decentralized small-unit leadership. As in earlier conflicts, capable NCOs frequently assumed command when officers

were incapacitated. Army leaders then developed a new Ranger training program in the summer of 1951, and the Army aimed to have one Ranger-trained NCO per rifle platoon. The Army also created an eight-week NCO course at the Infantry School to produce squad leaders for the war, but that did not begin until the summer of 1953. Instead, individual units developed programs that were generally successful. Even though the US Army was constantly short of NCO strength, hovering around 50% unit to unit, the Korean War marked a significant shift in recognizing NCOs as battlefield leaders.[56]

The Korean War had exposed a critical need for more and better-trained leaders at the small-unit level. The Army Staff recognized the shortcomings of relying on improvised courses and on-the-job training to prepare NCOs for leadership in the nuclear age. At General Bruce C. Clarke's urging, the Army's NCO Academy system was developed in June 1957 when the Department of the Army published its first regulation to establish standards for NCO Academies.[57] These early NCO academies often needed more consistency in the quality of their instructors. Teaching duty was not prestigious, and unit commanders hesitated to release senior NCOs for academy attendance, much less to teach. The academies remained separate from the Army's formal school system, and relatively few NCOs attended.[58]

The status of noncommissioned officers (NCOs) in the US Army underwent gradual changes with congressional legislation throughout the 1950s. The Army introduced a revamped Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) system in 1954 and a new specialist rank system reminiscent of the old technical ranks.[59] A pivotal development was the Military Pay Bill of 1958, which introduced two new pay grades, E-8 and E-9. This change highlighted the growing importance of senior NCOs in the post-Korean War era and provided a means to reward exceptional E-7s for their outstanding service.[60] Meanwhile, atomic warfare was slowly becoming the army's focus. Army leadership emphasized NCOs' increased responsibilities in theoretical nuclear warfare, where scattered units might need to operate independently. Warfare in that manner would require highly decentralized leaders to operate at the distances required for perceived atomic combat. The five-sided divisional structure required more NCOs in leadership roles than World War II divisions.[61]

Vietnam and "Shake n' Bake"

The Vietnam War presented new challenges for NCOs. Initially, many experienced American NCOs served as advisors to South Vietnamese

forces before transitioning to combat roles as US involvement escalated. Yet, throughout the war, NCO positions were constantly short-staffed, and junior soldiers were promoted quickly, thanks to individual replacement policies. As such, company-grade officers often bypassed NCOs, diminishing their traditional leadership role. The diminishing prestige of the NCO corps in Vietnam led to an identity crisis for many NCOs during a conflict fought mainly at the squad level.[62] The Vietnam era also included growing internal tensions within the Army. Soldiers directed hostility and resentment at officers and career NCOs, or "lifers." As such, incidents of insubordination and violence towards senior NCOs and company commanders increased as the war progressed. The shift to an all-volunteer force in 1973 marked a move towards a professionalized force and offered a solution to the crisis.[63]

To address professionalism and the need for qualified NCOs to lead maneuver squads in the field, in 1967 Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson created the Noncommissioned Officers Candidate Course (NCOCC). This 10-week program, followed by ten weeks of practical training, was designed to produce combat-ready infantry NCOs quickly. After completing the course, these newly trained NCOs were sent to Vietnam to lead infantry teams and squads in combat operations. While the "shake and bake" NCOs generally performed well, the Army recognized that NCOCC was a wartime expedient, not a long-term solution. The school was not extended to those outside of the infantry, but the program's success stimulated fresh thinking about how to educate NCOs across the force.[64]

In the next evolution of standardized NCO education, the Army developed a formal Noncommissioned Officer Educational System (NCOES) in 1971. The new NCOES consisted of three levels of instruction, later expanded to five, guiding NCOs through progressive skill levels in their military occupational specialties (MOSs). The system included introductory courses for E-4s and E-5s, advanced courses for E-6s and E-7s, and a senior-level course at the Sergeants Major Academy for selected E-8s.[65] The implementation of the NCOES in 1971 marked a significant milestone in NCO professional development: for the first time, the Army had a formal, standardized system that educated its noncommissioned ranks.[66]

Post-Vietnam Professionalism

Discipline challenges continued as the war ended. In addition to ending what was, at the time, the service's longest war, the army was also transitioning from a conscript army to an all-volunteer force. Army leaders, and NCOs in particular, had to manage a myriad of discipline issues

including rampant use of drugs, and the presence of criminal gangs within the ranks.[67] The army improved family support structures and training facilities and introduced a revamped NCO career management program in 1975. The Enlisted Personnel Management System (EPMS) provided career development paths for all NCOs. The EPMS was further complemented by the Noncommissioned Officer Development Plan (NCOPD) in 1980, emphasizing formal NCO leadership training at all command levels.[68] These new systems provided the institutional and structural framework necessary to produce professional NCOs for a modern Army.

One critical component of professionalization in the period was the development of the Creed of the Non-Commissioned Officer. The creed emerged from a period of significant change and challenge within the US Army in the early 1970s, following the Vietnam War and the transition to the AVF. The creed was developed within the NCO Subcommittee at the US Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Sergeant First Class Earle Brigham recalled starting the process by simply writing the letters "NCO" on a blank sheet of paper brainstorming from there. The goal was to create a standard—a "yardstick"—for NCOs to assess their own performance and embody the values of the NCO corps. First appearing in NCO course materials in 1974, the Creed wasn't officially formalized in an Army publication until the 1986 edition of Field Manual 22-600-2, *The NCO Guide*.[69] To this day, the creed provides basic guidance for noncommissioned officers regardless of MOS, duty position, status, or location.

By the end of the Cold War in 1989, the NCO's role was as vital as ever. The modern army developed a competent, adaptable, and proficient NCO corps to lead its small units as it modernized its technology throughout the later years of the Cold War. This was coupled with a post-Vietnam refocus on large-scale combat operations rather than low-intensity counterinsurgency. The army's success in preparing for this type of combat was evident in its performance in Operation Desert Storm. However, the rest of the 1990s included a massive drawdown of forces, and the army shed approximately 40% of its total personnel between 1990 and 1995.[70] The army's commitments increased in Somalia and the Balkans, however, and deployments increased by 300% during this time. Navigating immense fiscal constraints, an information revolution, and an increased operations tempo, the Army relied on its noncommissioned officers to keep morale high and units ready. The NCO corps' was instrumental in sustaining relatively high retention rates and shaping the modern US Army as it entered the new millennium.[71]

Into the 21st Century

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, altered the future of the United States Army in the most dramatic way possible. For the first time since the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States had been attacked, and the country was at war against an elusive foe. By October, Special Forces NCOs served as the vanguard for American forces in Afghanistan, setting the stage for a two-decade war that emphasized small-unit leadership. It was, after all, during the Global War on Terror that the Army coined the phrase "strategic corporal," referring to the broad, global impact that corporals can have from their tactical fighting positions.[72] Years of focus on NCO professional development paid off in the opening phases of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and throughout the counterinsurgency phases in which individual NCOs had an immeasurable impact on the overall mission.

NCOs continued to exhibit incredible bravery and initiative under fire. The story of Sergeant Salvatore Giunta in the Korengal Valley provides a keen example. One night in the fall of 2007, Sgt. Giunta's platoon came under intense enemy fire from multiple directions. In the initial blast, the point man, lead fire team leader Sgt. Josh Brennan, was wounded. As his automatic rifleman returned fire, he was also wounded, as were the squad leader and others on the patrol. Knowing that his friend and fellow team leader Brennan was under fire, Giunta ran to the sound of the guns, found two members of the Taliban carrying Brennan off, killed one and wounded the other, and disrupted the ambush. The enemy combatants dropped Brennan, and Giunta was able to recover his severely wounded comrade in arms. Brennan succumbed to his wounds, as did the platoon medic, Specialist Hugo Mendoza. Nevertheless, Giunta was awarded the Medal of Honor for disregarding his personal safety to save his comrades.[73]

In early Global War on Terror efforts, the Army identified a need to improve how it educates its NCOs to share lessons from its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) implemented a new curriculum for NCO education in 2009. That same year, CSM Raymond Chandler became the Commandant of the US Army Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA), marking the first time an NCO held the position of Commandant at a significant Army school.[74] To better coordinate NCO development across the Army, the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) established the Institute for NCO Professional Development (INCOPD) in August 2009. INCOPD was tasked with coordinating and developing all NCO education and professional development

aspects. The institute developed a comprehensive NCO Educational and Professional Development System (NCOPDS), replacing previous education and professional development systems. This new system was introduced to the Army with the publication of *NCO 2020 Strategy: NCOs Operating in a Complex World* in December 2015.[75] The NCO 2020 strategy included a new plan for NCO professional development known as the NCO Professional Development Strategy (NCOPDS) that focused on developing skills and knowledge, matching NCOs with appropriate roles, and upholding the profession's standards across five sequential schools that NCOs attend at different career stages.[76]

Conclusion

The post-9/11 era, with its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as part of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), has presented the Army and its NCO Corps with their greatest trial to date. The prolonged state of war has placed immense pressure on troops and resources. Tactically, today's NCOs bear more responsibility for mission success than at any other time in Army history. The nature of modern conflict emphasizes the role of small unit leaders and decentralized operations, and any future conflict, whether another low-intensity war, nation-building, or fighting a near-peer adversary, will require NCOs adept at taking initiative and taking care of soldiers.

Building on two centuries of tradition, the modern NCO remains crucial to the US Army's effectiveness and adaptability in facing new global challenges. NCOs today play a vital role in upholding Army values across all ranks; they are responsible for troop morale, training, welfare, and readiness and now face additional challenges, such as the stresses of war and frequent deployments. The NCO corps is well-prepared for these demands thanks to educational, professional, and organizational reforms. Although the diversity of roles in today's NCO corps might surprise Baron von Steuben, he would undoubtedly recognize it as the embodiment of the Army's backbone he envisioned over two centuries ago.[77]

The evolution of the NCO corps demonstrates that it is the critical link between the enlisted ranks and the officer corps in an increasingly complex military environment. And yet, today's NCOs are not dissimilar from those of yesteryear. At their core, they must, as Command Sergeant Major James A. Johnson puts it, "inspire soldiers to be more than they ever thought they could be."[78] It is with the sergeant that the proverbial rubber meets the road. They are the pointy end of leadership. The first leader a soldier gets to know is likely the last they will see before they leave the

service. War, at its most basic level, is unchanged. Clausewitz writes that war is a contest of will, and the NCO serves as the US Army's unbreakable backbone, sustaining the will to fight over two centuries.[79]

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Chapter 2

How the US Army Uses Non-Commissioned Officers

SMA (Retired) Kenneth O. Preston & Kate Dahlstrand, PhD

In a 2007 US Army news bulletin out of Grafenwoehr, Germany, SGT Aimee Millham reported on the first ever meeting of the Conference of European Armies for NCOs. Years into the Global War on Terror (GWOT) with two active combat zones and no clear end in sight for either one, the US Army still had crucial lessons to share with international allies and peers. Namely: how to empower noncommissioned officers "to make the immediate, on-the-ground decisions that affect front-line Soldiers in battle."[1] The United States military and their treatment, investment, training and development of enlisted and noncommissioned personnel has created an all-volunteer force that understands their roles, their responsibilities, and has a vested interest in the outcomes of a mission accomplished. In other words, the US Army NCO Corps is a trusted institution admired by many nations around the world. At that 2007 conference, thirty sergeants major representing nations throughout Europe and Eurasia gathered to learn, mirror, and apply US Army lessons and models developed over centuries of trial and error.[2]

When defining and describing Informal Leadership, US Army doctrine highlights the role of the NCO as a critical part of the informal network. Cohesive teams are built by leaders who understand that informal and formal channels, networks, and structures facilitate success. Traditional chain of command, technical channels, and standard operating procedures within an organization represent formal networks in the US Army. Informal networks, however, can hardly be described without acknowledging the weight and impact noncommissioned officers play in facilitating the success of a mission or directive.[3] The US Army NCO is responsible for building "cohesive teams that are highly trained, disciplined, and fit," qualified to serve in the profession of arms.[4]

The US Army's NCO Corps has a long history of managing, training, and leading soldiers. Empathetic leadership, situational awareness, and understanding how the soldiers on an NCO's team can develop into their fullest potential are enduring hallmarks of the NCO's contribution to maintaining a fighting force. Not only do NCOs bear the brunt of responsibility for mission success at the tactical level, but they also increasingly fill positions that require agility, adaptability, and initiative when

taking care of soldiers. "NCO Business" is the business of people, and a good NCO understands the people they manage and lead. A strong NCO corps is a definitive combat multiplier because of the assurance of Mission Command that inherently develops when US Army NCOs are provided the time, training, and opportunities to exceed expectations based on commander's intent.

Working within formal networks, noncommissioned officers in the US Army can solve soldier and soldiering problems quickly and decisively. Within the chain of command, NCOs bring transparency to leadership on daily activities, training, and personnel issues. They are the link between junior soldiers and officers. They are the communicator and the facilitator of objectives as outlined by leadership. NCOs receive and disseminate information in both directions, to commanders and to subordinates, providing the trust necessary to undergird the modern Army doctrinal principal of "mission command."[5]

The NCO support channel is the enlisted leadership chain that parallels and complements the chain of command. This senior enlisted formal network assists the chain of command as supervision and guidance comes from the command sergeant major to the first sergeant and then down through the other NCOs and enlisted personnel. This is the formal network that accounts for planning, training, daily activities, and readiness. It is the daily routines performed in garrison that are transferred to all aspects of mission accomplishment. In garrison, training, and in the combat theater, "train as you fight" becomes critical to mission success. Families are cared for, military customs, courtesies and traditions are taught, and organizational culture is reinforced through the NCO support channel. The professional Army ethic is fostered through deliberate and thoughtful training developed, transmitted and instilled by NCOs.[6]

This is a system, a methodology, and it is cyclical. Because of this, NCOs must establish standards and grow leaders in the Army. There are three steps involved in growing leaders: establishing a standard, putting someone in charge of that standard, and enforcing those standards. Standards can come in the form of expectations, measurable entities, or policies and regulations. The Army is full of standards. As an example, Army Regulation (AR) 670-1, *Wear and Appearance of Army Uniforms and Insignia* addresses how soldiers wear all the different issued uniforms, authorized boots, grooming standards and more. All soldiers in the army do this, with the regular Army, National Guard and Reserves, all uniforms the same. Name tags are all in the same place as is the location of our rank. But AR 670-1 does not address how to wear field equipment. These stan-

dards are learned within the unit and sometimes published in unit Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). Verbal standards issued as orders take place when an NCO takes a squad of soldiers out to police the unit parking lot when the First Sergeant says pick up all trash and debris. Standards exist at the Department of the Army (DA) level all the way down to the platoon and section leadership.

In the second step of growing leaders, NCOs are empowered to oversee standards. They enforce compliance with established standards. The enforcement of standards by first line leaders is what develops and reinforces discipline at the small-unit level. NCOs at that level are responsible for training, correcting mistakes and maintaining adherence to those exact standards established at all levels of command from the Department of the Army to the platoon and squad. That's a significant responsibility for a new sergeant and it requires commitment. This is where the Corporal and Sergeant come into their roles as they are responsible for being, knowing, and doing the standard.

The third step is to hold the sergeant accountable for enforcing the standards. This is where NCOs who are senior to the one enforcing standards will come into play. When PVT Snuffy's appearance is substandard, or if Snuffy is acting inappropriately, it is SGT Jones who holds ultimate responsibility for Snuffy's appearance or conduct. Everything in the Army has a standard. The US Army is a standards-based organization.

These three fundamentals (establishing a standard, putting someone in charge of that standard, and enforcing those standards) became increasingly important throughout the Global War on Terror (GWOT). In a garrison environment, leaders trend towards immediate and on-the-spot corrections where minor issues are fixed quickly. In a deployed environment, however, with a unit spread across the battlefield, tactical leaders must have absolute trust in the ability of those first line supervisors to operate independently and without supervision to meet their commanders intent and accomplish the mission. The emphasis on enforcing standards all the time is tied to the discipline of the unit. Sergeants who fulfill their roles and responsibilities in the absence of senior leadership in garrison can be trusted when deployed in an operational theater and scattered across a battlefield. That battlefield is not the time to play catch up and train NCOs into being leaders.

A seasoned NCO can tell within five minutes of walking into a unit if that unit has established standards, if they have empowered someone to enforce them, and if the more senior leadership is holding them account-

able. Walk into a motor pool shop office. If the place is a mess, that is a reflection on the leadership team. Walk through barracks and open a mop closet in the hallway. If all the brooms and mops fall on the floor, that reflects on leadership. Enforce the standards of Preventive Maintenance Checks and Services (PMCS). When we perform PMCS on our assigned vehicles, equipment or weapons, we follow the step-by-step process outlined in the operator's manual. When we clear a weapon coming off the range, we perform that function as part of a step-by-step process. These are examples of standards that must be trained and enforced by the soldier's first line supervisor. What you do in a garrison environment must be done the same in combat. Train as you fight.

Candor and the NCO

In ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, the term "candor" is defined as "being frank, honest, and sincere with others."[7] Throughout literature developed for noncommissioned officers, candor is often grouped with other words (competence, character, and commitment), however when examining the chapter title's question, "how the US Army uses NCOs," the specific word "candor" becomes a critical asset. It is a skill that can develop under strong leadership, or it can wither on the vine when an enlisted soldier enters a hostile or intimidating workplace environment. *The NCO Guide* offers an extended definition, calling the attribute "carefully considered professional judgment offered to subordinates, peers, and superiors."[8] With these working definitions in mind and the role of the NCO in today's US Army, candor warrants further examination.

When employed effectively, candor strengthens an organization and its ability to accomplish any mission successfully. The ability to speak candidly is a skill that must be developed at the squad level. Environments that enforce standards through fear, threats and intimidation do not allow for the free exchange of ideas. Mission success is a collaborative effort. Leaders need transparent feedback to make informed decisions in the absence of orders. As a practice, candor should come from a place that seeks to improve a situation. The noncommissioned officer with candor has observed the situation and assessed the functions and processes for places where improvements could be made. She has thought through what she's observed, gathered evidence and intelligence on the issue, and developed solutions to any problems identified. Exemplary candor in action improves a situation, provides evidence and subject matter expertise to leaders and subordinates alike, and creates a peacetime army that is simultaneously an army of practice and improvement. When peace is no longer sustainable and organizations must accomplish mission success under combat condi-

tions, the units that developed candor throughout the ranks of the NCO Support Channel can exceed expectations in Mission Command.

Candor is fostered when leaders recognize the contributions that subordinates can bring to decisions. But because it is a trait that grows within an individual NCO throughout their military career, candor also requires some internal development and self-reflection. Candor also grows as an NCO develops in their career and are promoted to positions of greater responsibility.

> *I (Kate) saw the same point being made in SGM (Ret.) Rob Nelson's 2022 article from The NCO Journal, "The Understated Art of Knowing When to ST*U."*
>
> *Nelson taught me those lessons in person when serving as my platoon sergeant.*
>
> *"Words matter and silence can be just as effective, especially when you are learning and listening."*
>
> *Years later, that same advice was provided during my promotion to SGT and subsequent move to a new unit for that position.*
>
> *Before I left the unit that promoted me into the NCO Corps, my section sergeant, SSG Wanda Harvey, pulled me aside.*
>
> *"When you get there, don't open your mouth for the first 30 days."*
>
> *Nelson's article, and my section sergeant, sought to set NCOs up for initial success. Learn what you are walking into before trying to assert your vision of what "right" looks like in this new environment.*[9]

If candor is not coupled with the offering of potential solutions or tactics to correct an identified issue, then it is not useful. It's welcome when the person expressing it has a solid understanding of the situation being commented on, and the invitation to be candid will solidify as a noncommissioned officer practices it with the goal of improving a situation or process. A noncommissioned officer who deliberately fosters curiosity about their circumstances and the people around them will not only develop candor that is welcome to leadership, but also provide the transparency needed to keep soldiers ready for a mission.

The 17th Sgt. Maj. Of the Army, Michael R. Weimer, in a Muddy Boots article for the *NCO Journal*, thoughtfully articulated how readiness can be ruined by a basic lack of discipline or accountability to execute the

simplest of tasks. The threat of meeting a "near-peer enemy is too high to allow only a veneer of readiness." He went on to highlight the necessity of a readiness that is "tangible, concrete, and stubborn, driven by disciplined leaders as echelon who understand the consequence of facing a lethal enemy with artificial readiness."[10] Similarly, CSM Kirk R. Coley makes a compelling argument that once an enlisted soldier earns the "hard stripes," that should also imply they "made a deliberate decision to embrace their job as a profession."[11] But embracing the profession, alone, is not enough to transform a capable junior enlisted soldier into a contributing member of NCO Corps. Nor are the various schoolhouses or PME institutions. CSM Alexander Kupratty extends this line of thinking, identifying the onus of effective leader development at three different levels: Institutional, Operational, and Self-Development domains. Only the first one encompasses formal training and educational environments. Leader development in the operational domain takes place in real-world assignments, on-the-job training, and mentorship. Leadership developed through individual initiative in search for "continuous learning and personal growth," involves reflection, fostering one's curiosity and actively pursuing paths to greater professional opportunities.[12] In a unit that disregards these internal developments, candor cannot exist when it is most crucial. Robert Nelson and Wanda Harvey both understood this and saw the value in spreading the lesson to those who would listen. Candor is welcomed as an asset when it is backed by evidence and solutions. As a quality in an NCO, the trait ought to be aspirational for all enlisted. It is earned through a demonstrated history of deservedness and trust.

NCOs at all levels of responsibility must be approachable and encourage candor from their subordinates. Sometimes the greatest ideas come from the ranks below. Encourage soldiers and their families to speak and ask questions about policy and procedures. Soldier's perceptions are truth until they engage in a dialog with senior leaders to understand the bigger picture.

Cold War Encounters with Allied NCOs

It's the fall of 1978 and I (SMA Preston) was stationed in Gelnhausen, Germany. I served as the gunner on the Company Commander's tank in B Company, 1st BN, 33rd Armor, 2nd BDE, 3rd AD.

My platoon is selected to participate in a joint training event with a platoon from our sister German tank company.

In Germany during the Cold War, German and American units partnered together as sister units for training and exchange

events. It's required and I'm part of training that the world determined necessary. We are 100 precent manned and a part of NATO forces.

Our training prepares us for potential threats that might come out of the Warsaw Pact.

My platoon's sister unit is based out of Koblenz, Germany and one of their tanks is short a gunner. They had deployed to Bergen-Hohne training area for tank gunnery and maneuver training.

I see my opportunity to join a team for their training exercise and volunteered fur the duration of the training exercise. We had a great time training and sharing equipment.

Our tanks are similar and we use the same 105mm main gun and tank ammunition. We take turns as gunners and shoot targets on the range with each other's tanks.

We eat together.

We hang out together.

We live together for a week before departing back to my home station. All the German soldiers spoke enough English to help with translations, but on some level that never mattered.

We built community.

US and German soldiers had more in common than different. Rank structure, opportunities for progression, and the roles of NCOs as platoon sergeants and tank commanders all translated to the US Army I served. Their lieutenants were very knowledgeable about their role within the platoon and the necessity of their relationship with their platoon sergeants. Standards and discipline work together with each other. As mentioned above, the US Army is a standards-based organization. In assessing my experiences with German soldiers, I observed a military where they did not demand the same attention to detail as their American counterparts. Beards and hair length were superficial indicators that revealed a broader tolerance in what was authorized. Their equipment was clean and functional, but not as well organized. The authority of their officers and NCOs was very similar to US Army standards and it was the responsibility of German NCOs to teach, train, professionally develop and mentor their soldiers.

A second occasion brought me back, this time as SSG Preston, to the German platoon in Koblenz and I noted another difference.

Many of the junior enlisted soldiers and most of the NCOs were married and lived in the communities where they served in the German army.

Health and welfare checks are of paramount importance in the US Army, where first line leaders are expected to visit and check in on the soldiers living off a military base.

NCOs are expected to know their soldiers, their relative safety after hours, and their quality of life.

It seemed as if, after talking to many of the German NCOs in Koblenz, that when the duty day was done, all the soldiers went their own separate ways.

The *Bundeswehr*, depended upon compulsory military service to fulfill the troop numbers required by NATO. In 1956, the German Bundestag placed compulsory military service into effect as of 1 April 1957. Every male German citizen would be required to serve in the military unless registered as conscientious objectors. Conscientious objectors were required to perform alternative service to their country.[13] The Korean War had created an environment in Germany that spurred rearmament as parallels between the Korean and German situations were highlighted in German media.[14] By the late 1970s the German Army was experiencing 20-25% battalion strength losses four times a year as compulsory service contracts ended and new men were sent for training at the basic unit level. Initial training for newly entered soldiers took place in a concentrated company within a battalion. That company would be "marginally combat-ready" for months at a time and offered a stark contrast to the means with which American soldiers were trained. US soldiers received basic training at dedicated training centers—units outside the working system of combat-ready forces.[15]

The very real need to develop noncommissioned officers, and junior officers, within the *Bundeswehr* suffered as a result of the localized military entry training. In the most severe examples, up to 1/3 of unit professional leadership might be required to attend temporary education assignments, while the tasks and deadlines for those remaining behind stayed the same. My experiences highlight Cold War armies struggling to balance global security requirements against a diminished population of soldiers compelled into service. By the time I set foot on German soil in 1978, a shortfall of regular army enlistments, long-term career soldiers who joined willingly and remained in service long enough to be promoted into an NCO role or position, created an NCO shortage for the Bundeswehr ex-

tensive enough that some technical position vacancies were studied to determine if civilian substitutes would be a viable alternative.[16]

> *The role of British NCOs is very similar to their US counterparts*
>
> *I spent two years as a Staff Sergeant in an instructor position as part of an exchange with the British Army from October 1983 to October 1985, leaving that assignment as a Sergeant First Class.*
>
> *Acting as an exchange instructor and teaching at the Royal Armoured Corps Gunnery School in Lulworth, England, I worked for a British Major and Sergeant Major.*
>
> *I taught British and foreign military students on seven different platforms: Chieftain and Challenger main battle tanks; Scorpion, Scimitar, and Fox reconnaissance vehicles; and the Striker and FV 438 guided missile vehicles.*
>
> *I lived the first three months of my assignment visiting an operational tank company.*
>
> *I lived in their billets.*
>
> *I dined in their mess.*
>
> *I participated in their field exercises.*
>
> *Some similarities became evident: the British Army is disciplined and fit.*
>
> *The do not sing when they run but, but they offered to let me sing if I wanted to keep them entertained.*

When I arrived at the Royal Armoured Corps Gunnery School, the British enlisted soldiers had already demonstrated their capabilities, not only in traditional combat missions, but in peacekeeping missions that built relationships. When Israel invaded southern Lebanon in June of 1982, British soldiers joined American, French and Italian forces in sending forces into the region to restore peace.[17] British NCOs were thoroughly trained in routinely revised British Army doctrine throughout the 1980s, however the connecting thread in all iterations stressed the importance of Mission Command.[18] Decades prior to having instant access to a global internet of information inside one's mobile telephone, for the British soldiers of the 1980s, as well as the Germans and Americans, the key to success in Mission Command came through being an army in constant practice. NCOs were responsible for soldiers and for ensuring their suc-

cesses. The ethos of Mission Command within an organization required a constant state of cultivation, not just in tactical or operational situations, but in peacetime and in the barracks. When soldiers stay ready, it does not take much for them to get ready.

Where Peer Threats Fall Short

Peer threats in the global race towards influence and power, like Russia and China, have long witnessed how enlisted personnel contribute to American successes. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 demonstrated to the United States military leaders the stagnation and shortcomings of a peer threat's operational abilities. The Russian army has history of success without a strong NCO corps, but the successes rely on Russian officers, their personality and their performance. At the tactical level and in situations where Mission Command requires agility, Russian hierarchal and top-heavy structure of military forces does not allow for delegating authority and trust. Defense analyst Michael Kofman has highlighted how the Russian military is generally considered "rigid at the tactical level and flexible only at the strategic operational level," creating a vacuum of "ownership and independent thinkers" that makes American military doctrinal concepts like Mission Command impossible.[19] The Russian Forces maintain a hybrid system of conscription and contract service as a means to supplement the numbers needed for combat operations across the Russia-Ukraine border. Leadership development, planning, training and disciplinary actions are carried out by Russian lieutenants, leaving little vested interest for enlisted soldiers to hold in mission success.

Moreso than the structural barriers that prevent enlisted buy-in of military service, however, are the informal traditions that create hostility. *Dedovschina*, a system of hazing developed among the conscripts, is when second-year conscripts exert their limited seniority and power in the form of physical violence, harassment, humiliation and theft.[20] The shift from conscript service time from two years to one year of mandatory military service in 2007 was partially intended to slow the practice, however as recently as 2023, global news outlets have highlighted how torture and humiliation continue within the enlisted ranks. Recent efforts to improve enlisted soldier's quality of life have included creating paths to continued government service beyond the compulsory military year.[21]

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) fields a large suite of military weapons and equipment. Their ability to translate materiel power into proven combat effectiveness, however, remains to be seen.[22] The PLA has witnessed the Russian military flounder when it comes to developing a

strong NCO corps and is taking stock of how the US military uses its NCOs. China is working to develop its own NCO corps as part of a deliberate effort to make the PLA a "world class military by 2049." One of the primary challenges to surface has been internal personnel issues. As with the Russian military, China's junior officers are handed the same responsibilities that the US expects NCOs to handle. But "pushing authority down to the lowest possible tactical level" is not a part of the PLA culture. They exist in a "very vertical and stove-piped command-and-control system," that does not translate into agility or create situations where Mission Command is possible.[23]

Contemporary Issues and Persisting Lessons

The Commandant for the NCO Leadership Center of Excellence, CSM Tammy Everette points to the power of consistency when looking at how the NCO Corps has evolved since she earned her SGT stripes in 1999. "The core mission of the NCO Corps has remained the same," she argues, which is "accomplishment of the mission and the welfare of Soldiers." The environment in which soldiers operate, however, is different and the way soldiers communicate has certainly evolved. In 1999, a young NCO could make mistakes that could be contained to the squad or local area. Soldiers could learn from it and move on, but today a mistake can be instantly shared across the force and live on the internet forever.

SMA Weimer also highlights how things have changed since the turn of the twenty-first century, pointing out that with the renewed emphasis on preparing for Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO), "none of our current military leadership has experience in LSCO. While Desert Storm and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 are the closest in recent history, the near-peer factor was still missing."[24] Noncommissioned Officers, then, become the lynchpin to success in the way they enforce readiness in an army in a constant state of transformation. Commanders can only expect subordinates to fulfill their intent and exercise their authority placed upon them under Mission Command if this is an ingrained value and norm, a part of the unit's culture in all environments. This requires immense levels of trust earned through consistent performance and embodiment of the army values. NCOs, as outlined in *The NCO Guide*, "must be comfortable in exercising initiative to make decisions and act." Transparency, actively practicing and developing technical skills, and a commitment to understanding the people performing the work as it relates to the greater mission being served are all integral.[25]

The December 2025 National Security Strategy recentered the US military's focus on to the Western Hemisphere, while recognizing the need

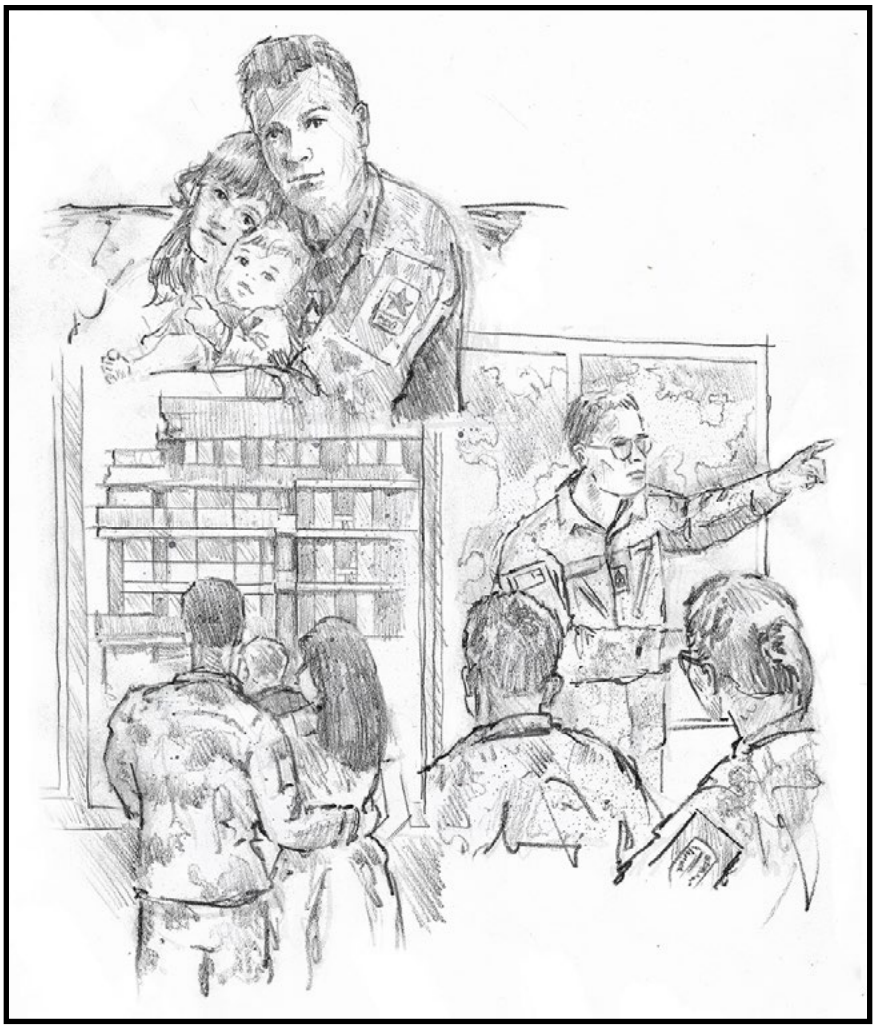


Figure 2.1. How the Army Uses the NCO. Dale Cordes, untitled, 2026, graphite on paper, Lawrence, Kansas.

to "recruit, train, equip, and field the world's most powerful, lethal, and technologically advanced military." (pg. 3) Today's NCOs are the most educated enlisted fighting force in American history, and today's missions require situational, cultural, and historical context. Acknowledging this at an individual, squad, platoon, company and battalion level creates a transparency that allows for Mission Command, but only when paired with a personal investment in success.

NCOs who internalize this professional approach have a lasting impact on the soldiers they encounter throughout their career. When I (SMA

Preston) arrived at Fort Hood, Texas as a young PV2, I was married with a newborn daughter. Soldiers in the rank of specialist and below were not authorized to live in on-base housing. I found an apartment off base and settled my family prior to signing into the reception station in the 1st Cavalry Division. Before the Army had family readiness groups or sponsorship programs, my new squad leader, SGT Dale Stark and his wife looked out for us and ensured we were living in a decent neighborhood, and we had everything we needed. I always remember how they treated us, and those lessons would come into play later in my career as a first sergeant (1SG) and command sergeant major (CSM).

My company commander and 1SG in Gelnhausen, Germany were great role models, and I captured many lessons that would set me up for success as a senior NCO. I watched them as a new command team change a tank company from a low performing unit to one of the top companies in all of Europe. While the commander was focused on training crews and platoons, the 1SG focused on NCO development. With a very full training schedule, 1SG Gary P. Pastine carved out 1 hour per week for NCO professional development (NCOPD). He personally taught every class and would never farm the class out to an outside source. He was the subject matter expert. He taught a blend of field training tasks as well as garrison duties and responsibilities. He taught us what "right" looked like and held us accountable.

Just as the officers had additional duties, Pastine also developed additional duties for the NCOs. I had two: I was the Drug and Alcohol Education Specialist who managed the uranalysis program for the company, and I was the map custodian to maintain basic issues of maps for each vehicle in the company. Every tank, truck and Jeep had a map canister with a basic load of maps that covered our General Defensive Positions (GDP). Both programs were inspected formally each year.

I learned that attention to detail and high standards contributed heavily to all successes. Not just for promotion or some self-fulfilling ideal, but for developing high morale, cohesiveness, pride among soldiers in their unit, and education. The tank company when I arrived had low morale, no pride or cohesiveness, and very few mentors. Pastine arrived at the same time I did, and the company commander arrived six months later in the fall of 1978. I was serving as the gunner on the commander's tank. We had just finished 30 days in the field doing a REFORGER (REturn of FORces to GERmany) exercise when CPT James E. Bessler arrived. With less than 90 days, which included Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, the training focus was preparation for and rail-load deployment to Level

2 tank gunnery qualification at Grafenwöhr Training Area. As a new tank crew, we spent what seemed like hundreds of hours practicing crew drills in the motor pool until we achieved a standard that far exceeded average performance. We achieved the second highest score in the battalion during Level 2 gunnery in the winter of 1978. Learning what it took to achieve excellence, the sacrifices made, the time committed, a standard based on perfection and speed, and the success we enjoyed, changed the trajectory of my career and life forever. The next two years were fun and exciting for the entire company.

All these lessons as a young NCO shaped my outlook as I moved to positions of increased responsibility.

The individual concerns of the US Army in 1978 have certainly changed from those in a post-GWOT military.

Physical maps have been replaced by various iterations of satellite-based global positioning software.

Issues that used to be dependent upon an active informal network of families and spouses at the unit level can now be facilitated through well-resourced army organizations trained and prepared to offer information and assistance.

Technologies and processes are more streamlined.

The human factor, however, remains the key to success.

When enlisted soldiers recognize the community they joined when they raised their right hand, they become invested in it.

NCOs build that community and foster the development of their technical and professional skills.

In the chapters that follow, SGM (Ret.) Robert Nelson and SGM Richard Russell provide the human factor in action, working through army doctrine and parsing out the bullet points and military-speak to communicate persisting lessons for the next generation of enlisted leaders. The lessons learned in their combined decades of military service provide a wheelhouse of subject matter expertise from which to pull. Notice the moments where small and personal interactions facilitated their professional growth. Neither of these authors were born perfect noncommissioned officers. They offer a candid recollection of moments that forced them to grow as a soldier, as a leader, and as a human being responsible for the lives and livelihoods of others.

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Chapter 3

The Backbone of the Army

The 'eathen in 'is blindness bows down to wood an' stone;
'E don't obey no orders unless they is 'is own;
The 'eathen in 'is blindness must end where 'e began,
But the backbone of the Army is the non-commissioned man!

–Rudyard Kipling, 1896[1]

While many consider Kipling to be controversial, he was right about one thing in his poem *The 'Eathen*: the backbone of any Army is the non-commissioned officer. For almost as long as the United States Army has been in existence, the noncommissioned officer has been likened to its backbone. Like the anatomical spine that enables a human to stand erect, and fight, the NCO performs similar functions for Army leadership. Baron Fredrich Wilhelm von Steuben was the first to use the term in 1778, while serving as the Inspector General of the Army. A year later, von Steuben created the Army's first drill manual that also standardized the roles and responsibilities of noncommissioned officers, *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United State*s. He realized the invaluable role that NCOs would assume during the Revolutionary War and beyond.[2]

One hundred and ninety-six years after von Steuben compared the NCO to a backbone, Sgt. First Class Earle Brigham developed the Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer while working at the US Army Infantry School at Fort Benning.[3] The creed serves as the bedrock for NCO performance, and the majority of NCOs in the Army are able to quote it verbatim. The creed's first paragraph exhorts the American NCO to remember not only their history, but their important role supporting the entire body of the Army: "I will not forget that I am a member of a time-honored corps known as the backbone of the Army."[4]

Today the Army still recognizes NCOs as such in both official correspondence and doctrine. The 2019 edition of Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22*, Army Leadership and the Profession* reminds readers that, with that responsibility, NCOs "responsible for standards and discipline… are critical to training, educating, and developing individual crews and small teams." In so doing, they are accountable for "the care of their Soldiers and setting examples for them."[5]

Beyond the historical roots and the doctrinal definition of the backbone of the Army, the characteristics of this body part offer a strong analogy to the attributes needed of a leader. Strength, structure, protection, and purpose help the NCO nurture the training, wellbeing, and discipline of Soldiers in pursuit of the ultimate goal of the United States Army: the accomplishment of the mission. This priority of work is sometimes difficult for young NCOs to understand, as they are charged by the NCO Creed with "two basic responsibilities, the accomplishment of the mission and the welfare of my Soldiers."[6] In many cases, NCOs will be able to care for their Soldiers and accomplish the mission without conflict. In the inherently dangerous profession that is the Army, however, there will be times where Soldiers and their NCOs will be in danger due to the mission. Thus, the concept of "mission first people always."[7]

"Mission first, people always" has been a catchphrase adopted as a motto of various units and organizations throughout the Army. The phrase highlights the paradox that NCOs sometimes face regarding these most basic facets of leadership. The phrase "mission first" emphasizes the priority of the task at hand, yet any given task is much easier accomplished with well cared for subordinates who enthusiastically meet the challenge of the day thanks to leaders, NCOs, who make their welfare a priority. Above all, NCOs will sacrifice themselves for those with whom they lead. Thus, duality is reconciled in selfless service.

One such example of selfless service in which the mission was accomplished, and the people were at the forefront of the mission is the story of Master Sergeant Roy Benavidez. While serving in Vietnam in 1965 with 5th Special Forces Group, he stepped on a landmine and was so badly injured that his doctors told him he would never walk again. Nevertheless, he returned to Southeast Asia in January 1968 on a second tour of duty. On May 2, 1968, after hearing about a patrol of fellow Green Berets and their Montagnard counterparts surrounded and in danger of being overrun near Loc Ninh, Vietnam, he jumped on the rescue helicopter. As they arrived at the crash site, they could not land and Benavidez jumped from upwards of 30 feet with no gear except a knife and an aid bag. Six hours later, Benavidez had sustained 37 wounds, rescued every soldier, retrieved the classified documents, and eventually hid himself in a body bag that made its way to his unit's aid station. When the doctor unzipped the body bag to examine the body, Benavidez spat in his face. He was not dead, and received the Medal of Honor from President Ronald Reagan 13 years later. Benavidez accomplished both the mission, and maintained the welfare of those soldiers.[8]

Benevidez's actions exemplify the strength, rigidity, and structure of a backbone while also demonstrating an immense dedication to preserving the welfare of his fellow soldiers. Benevidez thus offers a dramatic example of the duality of NCO leadership. NCOs can be taskmasters, disciplinarians, trainers, advisors, confidants, friends, parents, sons, daughters, teachers, leaders, followers, community members and a host of additional descriptors all at the same time. Juggling these roles allows NCOs to focus on the mission and their soldiers. It allows the US Army NCO to lead with both the empathy and ruthlessness required to motivate soldiers to close with and destroy the enemy by means of fire and maneuver.

But what of NCO leadership? In a perfect world, what should NCO leadership look like? In a lecture given at West Point in 1879, The Academy's Superintendent, Maj. Gen. John Schofield, gave the Army a definition of leadership within his explanation of discipline:

> The discipline which makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment. On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an army. It is possible to impart instruction and give commands in such a manner and such a tone of voice as to inspire in the soldier no feeling but an intense desire to obey, while the opposite manner and tone of voice cannot fail to excite strong resentment and a desire to disobey. The one mode or the other in dealing with subordinates springs from a corresponding spirit in the breast of the commander. He who feels the respect which is due to others cannot fail to inspire in them respect for himself; while he who feels, and hence manifests, disrespect toward others, especially his subordinates, cannot fail to inspire hatred against himself.[9]

While Schofield was writing for commissioned officers, the NCO's role in leadership cannot be minimized. Here is where Schofield's definition becomes important for NCOs, especially young NCOs. "The discipline which makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment."[10] NCOs do not need to be a jerk to get things done. Being liked is also not a required attribute for success. Two sides of the same coin, but NCOs need to reflect on both issues deliberately. Backbones are not formed overnight, and neither are great NCOs. The same can be said of young officers, which begs the question, what is the relationship between NCOs and officers? The answer: it's complicated.

The Backbone and the Brain

Commissioned officers and NCOs have unique relationships and doctrinal responsibilities specific to their ranks and position. However, when an officer is young in their career, they will be paired with a more experienced NCO who will help them develop their leadership capabilities beyond what they learned in the classroom. This is where the backbone helps to develop the brain, and if done well, will result in better officers and better NCOs.

While the work between the Platoon Sergeant and the Platoon Leader, or the Command Sergeant Major and the Commander may seem somewhat equivalent, it is very important for NCOs to understand that these positions are not the same. One of the main differences between NCOs and officers is the responsibility that officers have "for everything their command does or fails to do."[11] NCOs have responsibility for training, operations, and the execution of the mission, while the officer has responsibility for the outcome. This may seem like a nuanced difference, but it really isn't. The weight of responsibility rests more squarely on the shoulders of the commissioned officer than the noncommissioned officer. By accepting a commission, the officer accepts risk. Officers can delegate authority, but never their responsibility.

The 2007 Walter Reed Army Medical Center (WRAMC) mold issue serves as an important case study.[12] A wounded warrior was assigned to WRAMC for care in 2007 and assigned a room that contained mold behind the wallpaper. The soldier reported the issue to the *Washington Post*, and within two weeks of the outcry that the news generated, the Commander, Major General George Weightman was relieved of command by the Secretary of the Army. General Weightman had been in command for less than a month, and despite being on station much longer the Command Sergeant Major was not relieved. This is the difference in the weight of responsibility endured by officers that NCOs are shielded from. This difference is amplified when in command, as "the legal and ethical responsibilities of a commander exceed those of any other leader of similar rank."[13] NCOs are the backbone of the Army, and officers are the brain and when working together in harmony, create an unmatched synergy vital to the function of the Army.

NCO Business & Unicorns

Some of my (Robert) favorite memories from the Army are from my time as a platoon sergeant in the 296th Brigade Support Battalion at Ft. Lewis Washington. There is no better job for a young NCO in the Army

than being a platoon sergeant. As a platoon sergeant you have direct impact on the lives and careers of more than 30 soldiers, while still being able to perform MOS related duties. It is a great experience, and if you are a young NCO who is reading this book, and you ever get the chance to become a platoon sergeant…don't think about it, take it, you won't be sorry.

> *In 1999, I was a staff sergeant and had been a platoon sergeant for about six months when the Army assigned a brand-new lieutenant, fresh from the United States Military Academy at West Point.*
>
> *I had never had the chance to work with a brand-new officer, and my excitement was palpable. When we sat down for our first discussion, she was full of questions about the unit and the platoon, and I was more than happy to provide my opinion.*
>
> *At the end of our discussion, she said she had one more question but was embarrassed to ask: "The NCO cadre at West Point told me you would know the answer," but continued to beat around the bush for a minute before finally asking, "What is NCO Business?"*
>
> *I had been in the Army for approximately six years at this point and had never really considered her question before. I had heard the term used by other NCOs but had never used it myself.*
>
> *I thought for a minute and tried to recall when I had heard "NCO business" being used and gave her my response."NCO business is something that NCOs say when they are going to do something sketchy," I explained."It's used when they don't want to tell their officers what that something is" but then I told her that "I would never use that term because, like unicorns, NCO business does not exist."*

NCOs have different roles and responsibilities, but the only business is "leader business." This concept stuck with me for the rest of my career, and I always made a point to discuss NCO business with my officer and to never use it as a ploy to keep them uninformed.

So Who is The Heart?

If Officers are the Brain, NCOs are the Backbone, then it is the individual soldier that serves as the beating heart of the United States Army. The soldier is the one who gets things done. They are where the proverbial rubber meets the road. The whole of Army operations depends on sol-

diers performing their daily duties and completing individual and team-based tasks, which enable the Army to accomplish its mission. Like the heart brings life blood to the body, so do soldiers bring life to the Army. Therefore, the echelons of Officers, NCOs, and Army Civilian Professionals (ACPs) not only rely on the soldier, but as previously mentioned, are always charged with their welfare to enable the completion of the mission.

Army NCO's Character, Presence, and Intellect

The Army developed Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22 to be the definitive guide on leadership and the Army profession. ADP 6-22 recognizes NCOs as the backbone of the Army, and describes the character traits and competencies that leaders should embody and develop.[14] If you are a young leader, and you are unsure of where to find guidance, ADP 6-22 is a great place to start. Those things being said, this book is not meant to exalt Army doctrine as the final word on leadership. The obvious problem is that ADP 6-22 informs people how to lead in a perfect world, with perfect people, under perfect circumstances. We don't know about you, but in our combined 60 years of active military service, we have yet to experience the perfection needed for the prescriptions of ADP 6-22 to be universally applicable. However, we will use the "backbone" defined by ADP 6-22 as a construct for the next few chapters, because it really is a great place to start.

While ADP 6-22 is detailed in the guidance it gives on leadership, explaining how and why leaders should be, know, and do, it is also very ambiguous in its specifics. The manual is written in a way that allows it to remain relevant as a leader matures in their ability and grows in their positions of responsibility. An example is chapter 6, paragraph 6-31, "Building Trust, and Cohesion," where leaders are reminded to "encourage subordinates to work together for the greater good while promoting pride in organizational accomplishments." Inspiring teamwork amongst subordinates helps leaders develop units capable of creating high morale and complete mission accomplishment.[15] Yet in the four paragraphs dedicated to this sound leadership concept, the publication does very little to give leaders a step-by-step directive on how to build this trust inside their organizations. Instead, it dictates best practices that can help leaders, without the instruction on how to carry out the practices. This is because what a sergeant team leader does to generate cohesion is a very different practice than what a command sergeant major, or a brigade commander would do to foster the same level of cohesion in their organizations. ADP 6-22 provides leadership ideas and methods, while remaining flexible enough for application throughout the variety of leadership positions in the Army.

Leaders of Character

APD 6-22 explains that the Army expects its leaders to be leaders of character, and it defines character as "the moral and ethical qualities of a leader." But, what are morals and ethics? ADP 6-22 defines moral courage as something that enables leaders to "...stand firm on their values, principles and convictions." [16] However, despite appearing over 95 times, ADP 6-22 fails to define neither "moral" nor "ethical." Most readers would agree that morals concern what one believes is right or virtuous, whereas ethics are the principles that guide our decisions. It is important that we start here because the definition of morals and ethics have been discussed, disputed, and argued over for centuries, and there have been multiple philosophical beliefs assigned to the concepts of moral and ethical behavior. Aristotle, Immanual Kant, and Rene Descartes provide three fundamental theories of morality and ethics that undergird army leadership.[17] By having a basic philosophical understanding of morals, ethics, and virtues, NCOs can further develop and expand the lenses through which they view the world. The wider the lens, the better the understanding, the better the understanding; the better the decision, the better the outcome; the better the outcome, the better the Army; the better the Army the better the nation.

Soldiers of Character

Are leaders the only ones who possess virtuous character? Obviously not. In fact, one of the best examples of virtue that stands out to me (Rich) involves a young PFC filling in for a Team leader and the first night of a deployment to Afghanistan in 2005.

> *My unit had just touched down in Kandahar Airfield and were dragging our tired selves out of the C-130. Our trip from Italy had been anything but smooth and thanks to a problem with a friendly country we had to fly through, we were two days later than expected.*
>
> *The outgoing unit's leadership met us on the airfield and directed us to where to drop our stuff off. Shortly afterwards, we were shown the HUMVEEs we would take ownership of for the next year. My squad was given two HUMVEEs, and both looked like they had seen better days. The radios were shot, some equipment was missing, and I was scared to even check if the vehicles would start.*
>
> *As I sat down with my two fill-in Team leaders, we were hastily instructed that we (my two team leaders and myself) were need-*

ed to attend a brief that would serve as an exchange of relevant information for the handover of area and responsibility.

The messenger informed us that while we were all tired, it was expected that we would be ready to roll out in less than 12 hours to our platoon's area of responsibility.

I was beyond dismayed. We had a lot to do and very little time to get it done. I was exhausted and so were my Soldiers. The HUMVEES were in terrible shape and the entire squad leadership was about to go sit in a mandatory slideshow for hours on end.

Turning to my senior PFC and pointing to the HUMVEES, I told him, "Just do what you can." It was all the guidance I had time to give before being rushed off to the meeting. It was poor guidance, incomplete and I didn't come close to providing purpose, direction, or motivation. I was fully expecting to come back to a sleeping squad and vehicles that had very little done to fix them.

The meeting was uninspiring and completely uneventful. Due to severe weather, the outgoing unit had collected very little data worth sharing. Yet despite the lack of data, the outgoing leadership was masterfully skilled in ensuring they took a full four hours to tell us that they knew nothing and did even less. After the meeting, I lamented to my team leaders on how that time could have been used to give meaningful guidance to our squad and overseeing the restoration of the HUMVEES, so we were prepared to roll out on time. One of my team leaders, who was ever the optimist, assured me that the squad, under the watchful eye of the PFC I left in charge, must have done something to the trucks by now. I wanted to believe him, and the PFC was a good Soldier, but this was a daunting task, with little guidance, in a foreign environment, with an exhausted squad. I did not have high hopes for what we would find.

We moved into the motor pool and I was shocked to find that my two HUMVEEs were gone.

In their place, was one HUMVEE, that looked as good as the day it rolled off an assembly line. It was clean, stocked, and had its weapon system ready to go with the radio programmed with current encryption code. It even had a nice headset setup (something that was not commonplace in HUMVEEs at the time).

What threw me off the most is that one of my Soldiers was asleep inside of it. A PV2 from my Bravo team was doing his best to stay awake as he sat in the driver's seat. "Private, what is going on here? Where are the vehicles?"

"Sergeant, this is one of the HUMVEEs you saw hours ago," he promised. I checked the numbers, and he was right. Maybe it was the poor lighting (it was the middle of the night) but I just couldn't believe what I was seeing. Then the PV2 filled me in on what had happened and what was going on.

"When you left PFC in charge, he took charge," and the PV2 described how the PFC broke the squad down to compile a list of deficiencies for each HUMVEE. "He introduced himself to the motor pool sergeant and found the supply source. The entire squad work on one HUMVEE at a time, washing it, repairing it, and stocking it with our equipment."

The squad had worked tirelessly, with the mindset that the HUMVEEs needed to not only meet standards but be the absolute best they could be by the time we rolled out. The PFC had delivered the message that a significant part of the upcoming year would revolve around us being outside of the wire on these HUMVEEs. If they were poorly maintained, then we would face unneeded hardship.

If they were broken, it could mean the difference between life and death in an engagement. The squad bought into this messaging and got to work like their lives depended on it.

When they had finished the first HUMVEE, they had moved on to the second without taking a break. It was out of the area right then picking up the Mk-19 grenade launcher that would be mounted on it, along with another set of headphones from supply.

Shortly after getting the situational brief from my Soldier, the PFC I had left in charge rolled up with the remaining members of my squad. The second HUMVEE looked just as good as the first one did, and both looked better than any other HUMVEEs being handed over to our platoon.

I asked the PFC, "how did you get the squad to do so much in such a short amount of time?"

"You told me to do what I can. This is what I can do," he replied.

He didn't mean it in a boastful way, and he wasn't bragging about the accomplishment. This was his first combat deployment, and he wanted to do everything in his power as a leader or as a follower to ensure the success and safety of our squad. This was simply part of who he was, something he learned from his NCOs and something he exhibited consistently. Thanks to that initiative, he was promoted to Sergeant well ahead of his peers. That is what the backbone of the Army does.

The humorous follow on to the story is that while my PFC helped ensure my squad got everything done to roll out on time, none of the other junior Soldiers in the platoon had taken the same level of initiative. Therefore, we (the platoon) were not ready to roll out on time. I moved my squad and vehicles to the rally point and we all got a well-deserved few hours of sleep before movement.

Leaders of Presence

ADP 6-22 states that "command is personal."[18] Thus, the first concept related to being a leader of presence is to be present. As NCOs move up in rank and position, it becomes harder, and eventually impossible to be in every place where their Soldiers are. Many times, NCOs suffer paralysis by analysis and never make a decision of where to spend their time. Some believe that they must be with the commander to always offer good advice, others believe that they should be where their commander is not to extend the operational reach of the command. The right answer to where an NCO should spend their time is, to quote one of my favorite college professors, is that "it depends." The easiest solution to this problem is to identify risk or friction points and go there. It is good to be in a place where things are going right, but it is critical to be in a place where things are going wrong.

When thinking about presence, the first thing to do is try to view yourself through the eyes of your soldiers. Does your presence inspire fear, mutiny, compliance, or commitment? When trying to figure this out, you can look for a few signs.

- Do soldiers take the long way around the building to avoid walking by you on the sidewalk?
- Do your soldiers seek you out to help with professional and personal problems?
- Do your soldiers take initiative when you are not around?
- Do your soldiers tell you when they mess up?

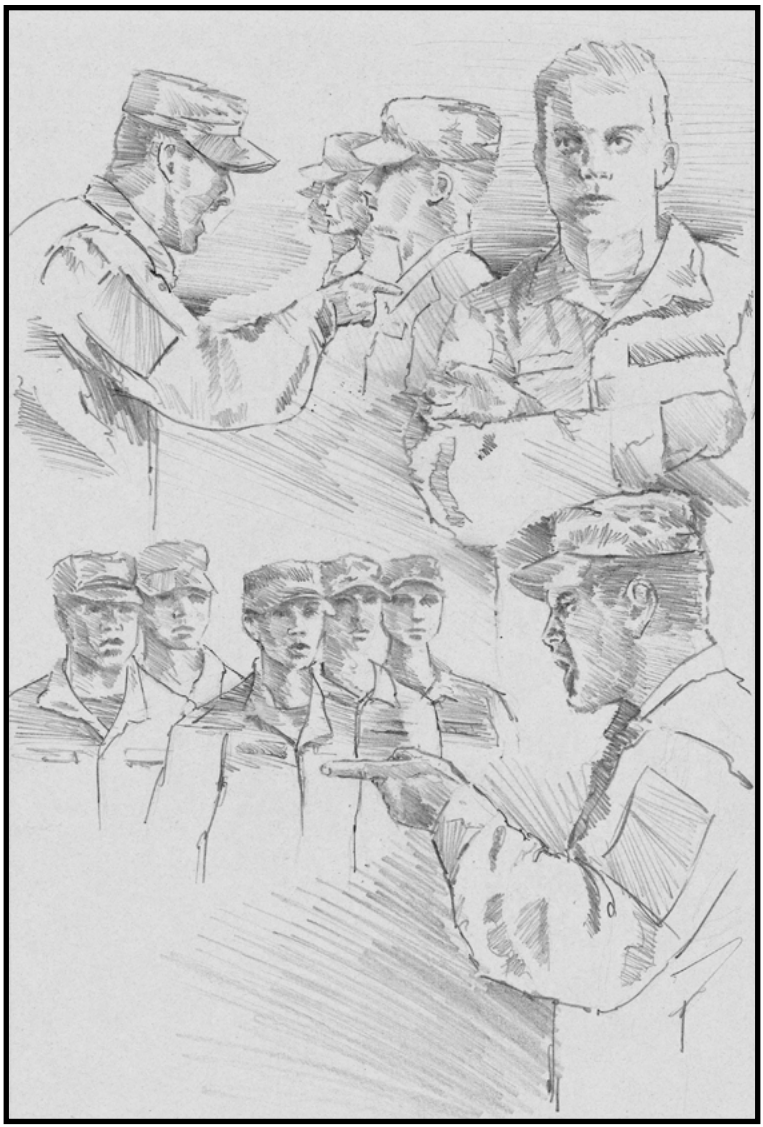


Figure. 3.1. Backbone of the Army. Dale Cordes, untitled, 2026, graphite on paper, Lawrence, Kansas.

ADP 6-22 provides four areas that constitute presence: Professional bearing, fitness, confidence, and resilience.[19] A leader of presence is one that sets the example for her or his subordinates to follow. The simplest test within this realm is to ask, if my soldiers were acting like I am acting, would I be proud. If the answer is yes…great! If the answer is no…well, you have some work to do.

One of the worst things that leaders can do is to lose control of their emotions and overreact to a situation. ADP 6-22 identifies this as counterproductive behavior, but I (Robert) am writing to you not from the doctrinal perspective, but from experience.[20] Throughout my career, from private to command sergeant major, I have been on the side of the soldier who has an emotional boss, and have regrettably been the emotional boss. I don't believe that good leaders should lose control of their emotions, but I have done it, and I have been wrong to do so. If you ask most leaders in the Army, they will agree that losing control of our emotions is a bad thing, yet it still happens. The obvious question here is why does it happen? Where do we learn this behavior? This question is interesting because in social situations we learn by watching others. Think of a time when you were not sure what to do at a dinner party or social event. Chances are, you looked at the people around you to see what they were doing. This is called the social proof principle, and it suggests that we look at others to see how they act before we act, and it is especially applicable to when we observe people doing the wrong thing and getting away with it.[21]

When I think about my application of, and approach to leadership while I was a platoon sergeant in the 296th BSB, I recall that I was trying to mimic the best leader I observed in my previous unit. This leader was a sergeant, and I was a specialist. This leader was extremely competent, but also extremely aggressive towards lazy Soldiers or incompetent peers. On more than one occasion, I could find him aggressively chewing out Soldiers for their shortcomings. That said, he was the most respected leader in our unit, and everyone believed that he cared about them and the Army. This leader ended up becoming a mentor to me, and I did my best to mimic his style when I became a sergeant. This became more important when I became a platoon sergeant, because I was in unfamiliar territory, and being unsure of what to do, I fell back on what I had seen in the past. By having observed an aggressive leader, who cared, and was well respected, I had found permission to act that way myself.

All in all, many of the traits that I tried to mimic were good. I cared deeply about the success of my unit and the wellbeing of my Soldiers. The problem I had was that at times, I would think the Soldiers needed an azimuth correction, and I would aggressively deliver a one-way conversation filled with expletives. I would throw things, break things, and act like a raging lunatic. I was in charge, and I was going to make sure everyone in my platoon knew it. From my perspective at this time, I was a good and caring leader who had high standards, and my leadership approach got results. We were easily the best platoon in the company, and my evaluations were pristine.

I was a great leader, just ask me.

Looking back at my time as a platoon sergeant, it was an amazing experience, and I loved every minute of it. However, if I were to do it again, I would never lose my temper publicly. While my public anger got some level of result because Soldiers were afraid to disappoint me, it also alienated some Soldiers which led them to think that I did not care. Near the end of my time in the 296th, a squared away Soldier with a bright future decided to ETS. I distinctly remember asking why she did not want to stay in the Army.

I wasn't prepared for what she told me:

It's because of leaders like you, who always yell and throw tantrums to motivate Soldiers. We don't need to be yelled at to get better; talk to us like adult human beings.

From that day on I never publicly lost my temper (except for article 15s, but more about that later). As a leader of presence, who is relied on as the backbone of your organization, you don't need to lose your temper to be a good leader, and if you have to tell people that you are in charge, then you aren't.

Leaders of Intellect

Intelligence is highly valued in both leaders and followers. ADP 6-22 notes that leaders of high intellect are those that can think critically and creatively, gain situational awareness faster, make good decisions, and take the right action. Leaders of intellect are also self-aware, understand how their leadership affects their Soldiers, and can anticipate the second and third order effects of their decisions.[22] The renowned Ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, believed that societies should be led by its most intelligent members (which in perhaps a form of confirmation bias, he believed were older male philosophers). Plato also observed that this would be difficult to accomplish because intelligent people tend to be smart enough to not want to be leaders. After all, leadership is hard, and as a leader, you are subject to the politics of the position, the critiques of your Soldiers, and in many cases ridicule of everyone who has an opinion on a topic, whether they understand it or not. Why would anyone with any measure of intelligence want to be a leader? Well, Plato has an answer for that as well. He believed that the only way to motivate intelligent people to put themselves into leadership positions was to threaten them with the possibility of being led by someone who was of lesser intelligence.[23]

Another problem with getting smart people to become leaders is something known as the Dunning-Kruger Effect. Named for the two psychologists who first explained the phenomenon in 1999, the Dunning-Kruger effect suggests that confidence is inversely proportional to competence.[24] A more direct way to say this is that dumb people don't know they are dumb, and smart people don't know they are smart. To illustrate this, pretend you are an artist who is learning how to paint. Your first few paintings probably would not be that good. However, after a few years, they might be to the point where you are proud of your work and start to show it off. You might even be confident that it is good, especially because it is much better than you could do when you first began. Now, let's say a master painter observed your painting, she might immediately notice all the small things that suggest you still have much work to do to become a master. In addition, this same master may have been painting for 40 years, and by this time knows just how much she still must learn about painting to be truly great. Thus, the more you know about a given topic, the more you realize just how much you don't know. Known for his blunt social commentary, American poet and novelist Charles Bukowski once wrote, "The problem with the world is that the intelligent people are full of doubts, while the stupid ones are full of confidence."[25]

If the Dunning-Kruger Effect is universally applicable, the obvious question is what can the Army do to counter it? The answer to this question is complicated, but the simple answer is to try to make everyone as smart as possible. Since the establishment of the Sergeants Major Academy in 1972, the Army has put considerable resources into noncommissioned officer education with the hopes of building leaders of intellect, and unlike Plato's leaders, would willingly step into leadership positions and use their brains as much or more than their positional power. While this approach has not been perfect, it gets better each year, as the Army continuously improves the outcomes of its noncommissioned officer education and development programs. The question now is: how smart should we be?

Never Outshine the King

Intellect and intelligence are great things, but sometimes they can cause problems for our enlisted force, and in a very Machiavellian sentiment, NCOs must remember that not everyone wants smart NCOs. In his book, the *48 Laws of Power*, the first law that Robert Green mentions is "Never outshine the master."[26] This is a cynical take, but in some organizations it is wise to not let your intelligence show if you happen to be smarter than your boss.[42] While the Army desires all NCOs to be leaders of intellect, there are still some leaders who do not want their subordinates

smarter than they are. As the Army's noncommissioned officers are becoming increasingly educated, there are still those who wish to relegate us to "HUGing" (haircuts, uniforms, grass) missions. In cases like these, the leader of intellect must continue to perform well, and understand that these attitudes will, in time, go the way of the dinosaur. This might not be a palpable thing to put in writing, but it is true.

Along these same lines, two officers published an article in the *US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* in 1988 titled "The Army's Command Sergeant Major Problem." We admit, this is nearing its 40th anniversary, but strong arguments and solid scholarship does not expire. In the article the authors describe the best sergeant major they knew as "Frank" who was a hard charging soldier in the Vietnam War. They describe their best command sergeant major as a man named "Henry" who was the best gunner in the battalion. They also describe them both as slightly overweight and undereducated. The authors then go on to mention that when command sergeants major from higher commands get travel-authority, they are treated as though four-star generals were about to visit and are given more pomp and circumstance then their ranks deserve. They conclude their critique of the Army's command sergeants major by providing recommendations to fix the problem to keep NCOs out of officer's business and to put the power back where it belongs, with the commander.[27] NCOs, even CSMs are not commanders, and should not act like one. However, the NCOs can extend the operational reach of the commander when they have the trust of the commander and have developed a shared understanding of the commander's intent. While the article is dated, some officers still undervalue what their NCOs bring to the table. A few officers just don't want smart or empowered NCOs, and unfortunately, we predict that most soldiers in the Army have experienced this sentiment at least once within their careers. This is one such example:

> *I (Robert) sat in awe as I listened to a four-star general address the students of the Sergeants Major Academy in 2021.*
>
> *For whatever reason, this general drew a clear doctrinal line in the sand between him and his command sergeant major. At one point the general even said "my command sergeant major is not part of the command team. Me and my wife are the command team. I sign the awards; I sign the leave forms. I am the commander, my CSM is not."*
>
> *At this point, he lost his audience but didn't seem to care.*

Doctrinally, this general was not wrong, but on a personal level of empowering his soldiers, he was falling short. As I watched the briefing, I could see the expressions on the face of the general's CSM. He looked utterly dejected to have to sit in front of a bunch of future sergeants major and hear how invaluable his commander thought sergeants major were.

I must be clear here, the general never directly said NCOs were not valuable, but that is the message the audience understood, and it was the "talk of the town" for weeks following the general's visit.

Power can sometimes convolute relationships and destroy a team. If an NCO ever finds themselves in a situation like the one previously described, remember that backbones support brains, and as such the NCO must keep putting forth the best effort possible regardless of the sentiment of the brain. NCOs in these positions, however, can take solace in knowing that someone (either they or their boss) is going to eventually PCS. Intelligence will seldom trump positional power, and sometimes the mindset of certain leaders is too entrenched to change. The leader of intellect will recognize this and Soldier on. Any organization that is composed of people will sometimes struggle with these types of issues, and the Army is no different.

While we believe that the number of officers that undervalue their enlisted counterparts are few and far between, they do exist, and I (Rich) also remember hearing from one such example while at the Sergeants Major Academy in 2019. This officer was a highly successful lieutenant general but went to great lengths to undermine the importance of the CSM as part of a command team. He went on to say:

The CSM is not my Battle Buddy. I don't need him to be with me 24/7. I can make decisions on my own. His job is to be wherever he needs to be to make sure the command succeeds. If I have to tell my CSM what to do, then he doesn't deserve to serve under me.

While this general was not necessarily incorrect (remember the purpose of a backbone is to support the brain), the way he delivered his comments implied that he did not value the advice of his CSM.

Sadly, this wasn't the first time I had heard a high-ranking officer speak on the unimportance of the NCO, so I wasn't as

shocked as some of my peers. Instead, I was laser focused on the general's CSM. It was common practice for the CSM to speak after their commander while addressing the Academy, and I was sure that no matter what his key talking points were, they would never be able to resonate after such lampooning from his commander.

I figured that the only two routes to take were to play the "yes-person" to the general's rant, or to incite a riot by the CSM speaking contradictory to the general's coarse comments. Interestingly, the CSM did neither.

Instead, the CSM demonstrated to us all exactly how to not only survive but thrive in such adverse conditions.

When the general introduced him, he stood up with complete military professionalism and authority.

He was stoic in his facial expression.

Not stern or angry looking, but stoic in a way that announced to us all why we should listen to him in a way none of his general's ranting could ever hope to match.

He started by discussing the importance of being present for his soldiers. He discussed hearing problems and being there, while still maintaining his presence of authority. He never acknowledged himself as special or overly important, but instead, spoke to the duty that CSMs must complete along with those of the Soldiers and the organization itself.

He shared personal stories about the Soldiers he had met in his unit and always found a way to make them not only the hero, but the center of attention in the story as well. Thanks to his wise and timely words, I didn't leave that assembly with resentment towards that general or any member of the officer corps.

Instead, I left with a feeling of pride in my choice to become a Sergeant Major and a better understanding of the type of standard I should hold myself to.

I have met many charismatic leaders in my time in the Army, but often I feel that charismatic leaders succeed in resonating with their subordinates by taking off the armor of their position and trying to present themselves on the subordinate's level. The problem with this approach is that it requires the leader to dance between the principles of liking

and authority described by social psychologist Robert Cialdini in his research on influence, most notably in Influence.[28] From being the likable buddy, to the boss, and back to the buddy again. This underappreciated CSM changed that mentality for me. He was both charismatic and likable at the same time. The point of this long story is that an NCO should not let their worth be decided by their officer counterpart (or superior if you are looking through the eyes of that insightful general), but instead by their dedication and actions to the commander, organization, and the Soldiers they serve.

One of the more interesting questions the experience left me with is how smart did the general want his CSM to be? He wanted him to be smart enough to carry out his orders and perform his duties, but was the general offended by the level of applause his CSM got at the academy over him? How did the general feel about the high level of competence of his CSM? Reflect on as you move forward in your quest for self-improvement. Don't be afraid to outshine the king, just don't make a spectacle of it if you do, and always give the king the support she or he expects from a backbone.

They're Smart…Too Smart!

We know that the Army want's NCOs to be leaders of intellect, but is there such a thing as a subordinate of intellect? As we mentioned earlier in this chapter, it is common to hear leaders talk about how they want their subordinates as intelligent as they could possibly be. Sadly, we do not believe this is true for all leaders that say it. While both officers and NCOs can wish for Soldiers who are intelligent and competent enough to carry out their tasks with minimal supervision, there is a point where the more intelligent the subordinate becomes, the more they tend to question your decisions, abilities, or leadership in general. This is not because of cockiness or the subordinate forgetting their place. It is because the leader successfully trained the subordinate to be just as tactfully and technically proficient as they are. The Army believes in training one level up and two levels down, and while this is good for grooming Soldiers to take on higher levels of responsibility, a leader that does a good job training their Soldiers may inadvertently create a point of friction.

Let's say that a CSM takes special pride in the aptitude of one of their first sergeants. The CSM goes out of their way to share their knowledge with that 1SG, including training them to think at the battalion level instead of the company one. The CSM does this not only because it is their job to train subordinates, but because they see the potential for

the 1SG to move on to the rank of CSM soon. But what happens when Army policy or other issues impedes that 1SGs chances of moving up? Now the CSM has a subordinate leader who is just as competent as they are. They also have created a subordinate capable of thinking at the same decision-making level as them. While this can be an asset, what happens when that newly empowered 1SG disagrees with the CSM's decision? Does the CSM reconsider their position on the issue, or do they tell the 1SG to fall back in line? At this point the leader has created a new wrinkle in their leadership dynamic that can have serious consequences depending on how they choose to approach the issue. If you are in a situation like this, either as the leader or as the subordinate, just remember friction sharpens knives when used by a skillful hand. However, you must be aware that this same friction can run the risk of developing an alienated follower. For a better look at this phenomenon, let's examine the parable of the Soldier and the Sandbag.

Sandbags

Once upon a time, a new NCO is put in charge of a Soldier who is working on the mundane task of filling sandbags and moving them from one point to another. The Soldier demonstrates aptitude and intelligence but has only ever been empowered to apply a basic understanding to his task. Sand is put into the bag, the bag is tied shut, then the bag is then moved from the filling point to the ending point. The Soldier goes about his work mindlessly at a slow, predictable pace that wastes effort and time, but is moving towards the accomplishment of the mission.

After observing the Soldier wasting effort and time, the new NCO spends some time teaching critical and creative thinking skills to the Soldier. He explains that Soldiers should always assess whether tasks are being done in the smartest way possible. As he explains that Soldiers should work smarter, not harder, he also says that it is okay to work harder if you are not that smart. At this point the Soldier feels challenged to complete the work in a smarter way and feels empowered to do so. After a bit of thought the Soldier deduces that it only takes a few minutes to fill a sandbag, but it takes twice that time to move each bag to the endpoint. The Soldier then decides that if he were to fill two sandbags at once, and move them at the same time, he could increase his work output significantly and finish the task sooner. With a newly altered plan, and a feeling of empowerment the Soldier goes about his work with new vigor and a faster pace.

The NCO sees how the Soldier demonstrated problem solving and is impressed with the new performance. Again, he urges the Soldier to

apply critical thought to the task to see if he can improve the work output further. The NCO teaches the Soldier the basics of logistics and of making use of available systems. After another short pause, the Soldier rethinks the path he is taking from the filling point to the drop off point. He then realizes by altering the route slightly, he could use the hardball road, which is a little longer, but would allow for the use of a pull cart. Up until this point, they had ignored the cart and the hardball because it seemed like the hardball was too long, and the cart would not work on rough terrain. By altering their route to incorporate the road, the Soldier found that the time saved by being able to fill and deliver 10 sandbags at a time, more than made up for the additional two minutes it took navigating the road instead of the dirt trail. Additionally, using the cart required less effort than carrying the sandbags by hand. The leader saw how the Soldier was using his intelligence to accomplish the mission in the best way possible, and the Soldier was excited to be allowed to incorporate his thoughts into the process. In this scenario, the NCO provided purpose, direction, and motivation, which allowed the Soldier to improve his ability to perform their task better than he had before. But the story is not over. Still not satisfied with the Soldier's application of intelligence, the NCO decided to try to multiply it further.

The NCO engaged the Soldier one more time. This time they told him not only to think critically and creatively, and not only to think about logistics, but also to think strategically and tactically about how the task could be carried out. The NCO shared some of their knowledge on these subjects and helped educate the Soldier further. After the development session, the Soldier took a short break to ponder and reflect on what he had learned. This time, instead of starting to work with a new and improved method of approaching their task, he instead went looking for his leader. When he found him, he had just one question.

"For what purpose am I filling all of these sandbags?" The Soldier asked. The NCO, taken back by the question, explained to the Soldier that the sandbags were being filled and moved to help build a fighting position at the drop off point.

The Soldier inquired:

> Why are we building a fighting position there? Based on what you just taught me, that particular placement has little to no tactical advantage and actually puts whoever is in that position at a complete disadvantage. The drop off area is at the bottom of a valley and has dense vegetation which will allow

> the enemy to sneak up on the fighting position undetected. The enemy could maintain the high ground allowing them to move freely while our Soldiers are trapped due to the geography and would not be able to defend easily. If our Soldiers had to withdraw, they would face a steep, uphill movement while under fire from the enemy.

The Soldier continues to offer feedback:

> Why don't we use the rock formation higher up the hillside for our fighting position? It provides natural cover meaning less reliance on sandbags, and there are better lines of sight so the enemy cannot sneak up on us undetected. I think we need to reconsider the sandbags and the placement of our position.

After laying out the plan, the Soldier's ideas are met with anger and frustration by the NCO. The NCO had their reasons for the placement of the fighting position and did not feel that they had the time currently to explain it to the Soldier who was only tasked with the filling and moving of sandbags. Furthermore, the NCO was upset and in shock of the audacity of the Soldier to pay back all of the leader's effort in educating him by questioning their guidance.

Due to having his orders questioned, and what he feels is a subordinate's attempt to embarrass him, the NCO snaps. *"When I want your opinion on how to conduct combat operations, I will promote you to a rank that matters and then ask for your opinion. Until that day arrives, I suggest you shut up and get back to the task I gave you. If you can't handle filling a couple of sandbags, then what makes you think you have the insight to question my orders? Now get back to work!"*

The Soldier, who was trying to apply the same thinking techniques that the NCO had taught him, is now dismayed and goes back to filling sandbags but at a much more lethargic pace. He fills one bag at a time, and still uses the cart since it requires less effort. There is no hustle, and there is little care as to how well or fast the task is done. The Soldier has become an alienated follower and now will refuse to apply any of the intelligence he may have developed because of the NCOs education.

In retrospect, the NCO's ability to create a Soldier capable of questioning his guidance, and his inability to handle tactful criticism, created a follower who is less dependable than the ignorant Soldier at the start of the story. This parable demonstrates how a leader's ego may not be capable of dealing with a Soldier that is too smart. While this situation is imagined, we are sure that most readers can think about a time in their life that they

have either witnessed a similar event or have directly experienced this through the eyes of the NCO or the Soldier.

Think deeply about this because what the Army expects of its backbone is evolving as we learn to think about the battlefield in multiple domains. In the future, the Army will face with hybrid threats that will make use of weaponized commercial off the shelf technology, deadly accurate top attack, swarming drones, devastating first strike capabilities, sensors that can detect our operations in multiple domains, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and unprecedented cyber-attacks, just to name a few of the challenges The Army needs every Soldier to use their cognitive abilities to the maximum extent possible. In the past we may have wanted Soldiers and NCOs who were just smart enough to get the job done in the best way possible without questioning orders, but in the future, this antiquated mentality could prove devastating. We suggest the NCOs, and all leaders in the Army, should want to harness the full cognitive abilities of the entire force and understand that disagreement or questioning is not disrespectful. Leaders do not need to be the smartest people in the room, but they need to make everyone else smarter.[29] Smarter Soldiers make smarter NCOs, smarter NCOs help develop smarter officers, smarter officers think about problems in unique and novel ways to defeat enemies who are employing capabilities we have yet to consider, which allows the nation to live happily ever after. So, leader of intellect...how smart do you want your Soldiers?

Questions for Discussion

- **Backbone, Brain, and Heart**

  How does this analogy clarify roles and responsibilities within a unit? Where can friction occur within this framework?

- **Mission First, People Always**

  How do you reconcile the tension between mission accomplishment and Soldier welfare? Have you faced a situation where these priorities conflicted?

- **Selfless Service in Action**

  Reflecting on the example of Roy Benavidez, what does true selfless service look like at your level of leadership? Is heroism always dramatic, or can it be quiet and consistent?

- **Officer and NCO Relationships**

  What does a healthy platoon leader and platoon sergeant relationship look like in practice? What behaviors build or erode trust between the "backbone" and the "brain"?

- **"NCO Business" and Transparency**

  The chapter argues that "NCO business" is a myth and that there is only "leader business." How can withholding information from officers damage unity of efort?

- **Leaders of Presence**

  When you enter a room, what reaction do you generate from Soldiers? Fear, compliance, avoidance, trust, or commitment? What evidence do you have?

- **Emotional Discipline**

  The chapter discusses the danger of losing control publicly. How does emotional overreaction affect long-term trust and retention?

- **Leaders of Intellect and Ego**

  How should leaders respond when a subordinate questions their decision using sound reasoning? How do you prevent ego from creating alienated followers?

- **The Sandbag Parable**

  In the "Sandbags" story, at what point did empowerment turn into friction? How could the NCO have handled the Soldier's tactical critique differently?

- **How Smart Do You Want Your Soldiers?**

  What risks and rewards come with developing Soldiers who may one day outthink you?

Recommended Further Reading

ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*. Provides doctrinal guidance on creating positive organizational climates, building trust, and developing leaders.

FM 6-22, *Developing Leaders*. Provides specifics and examples of how to develop leaders, including oneself.

"The Army's Command Sergeant Major Problem," by John C. Bahnsen and James W. Bradin, *Parameters*: U.S. Army War College Quarterly, September 1988.

"A Culture of Trust" by Michael K. Heffner and Ronny F. Johnson, *The NCO Journal*, May 2019.

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Chapter 4

Army NCO Competencies

Similar to the leadership traits, the Army expects its NCOs to have certain competencies that an NCOs must be able to do. While leadership traits are attributes that leaders are expected to possess, leadership competencies are the physical actions and procedures leaders are expected to conduct. More succinctly, traits are nouns and competencies are verbs. APD 6-22 lists the three interrelated competencies, leads, develops, and achieves.[1]

Leaders who Lead

The Army's definition of leadership is to influence Soldiers by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization. Being a leader could take the shape of being in a position of responsibility or it could simply translate into having soldiers who work under you. Fundamentally, however, leadership is influence and leaders are anyone who has influence over another person.[2] Being a leader, even in the army, is more about what you do than what rank or position that you hold.

The Army acknowledges that leaders exist in two varieties. Formal leaders, with rank and position; and informal leaders, who have influence over the actions of others. I (Robert) believe the ability to lead is directly proportional to your ability to get someone to do something that they otherwise wouldn't. Afterall, anyone can be a leader when it's time to go home early, but it is a bit more challenging when trying to get Soldiers to volunteer to come to work during the weekend. This ties nicely to the idea of influencing Soldiers by providing purpose, direction, and motivation, as motivation will cause someone to act. Leaders inspire action.

Setting the Example; the Leader

The best way to train, lead, and develop good Soldiers is to be one yourself. If you are a leader in any capacity, Soldiers are always looking at you to see how you act. They are doing this because they either want to criticize you and need ammunition, or they want to model your behavior and are looking for inspiration. Hopefully you fall into the second category in your Soldier's eyes. Therefore, it is critical to embrace the rules of your organization and set a positive example.

> *During my time as an instructor at the Sergeants Major Academy, I (Robert) was consistently amazed at the number of stu-*

dents I had each year whom I had to explain the basic rules of the Army's uniform standards.

My least favorite part of being a command sergeant major was making minor corrections to uniforms and conduct. I always thought that if I were making a correction, then somewhere a squad leader or platoon sergeant was not doing their job.

At the same time, I was not going to walk past a deficiency because silence can be translated into endorsement or encourage deficient habits.

It's just not the right thing to do.

I often received master sergeants arriving to the academy in unauthorized sunglasses, unauthorized backpacks, and thought it was okay to chew tobacco in an Army building.

I thought to myself, "how can someone make it to the Sergeants Major Academy and not know the basic rules of being a Soldier?"

I would always take the time to show them the regulation and explain why we as sergeants major had to always follow the rules. Setting the standard is for everyone, and for the most part, my tutelage was well accepted.

About 10% of my peer instructors, however, refused to follow the basic rules as well. It seemed as though that is was a matter of pride to this group to display that they were above following basic standards.

They viewed their roles as instructors, not one of enforcing uniform regulations.

I always addressed this, persisting habit that made me somewhat unpopular.

"Sergeant Major, do you want me to be an instructor or someone who goes around correcting students?"

But that's a false dichotomy because it turns out that one can be a good leader and enforce discipline at the same time. Being good at enforcing discipline will make one better at leading and thus produce a synergistic effect. Making corrections does not require an NCO to be a jerk. No matter your rank, do your best to always follow all standards, and influence your Soldiers to do the same.

Be agnostic about the standard. In most cases, I had no opinion on a given standard, I just followed and enforced it. If the Army wants to approve pink socks, I don't care, but I will perform my duty and enforce discipline within my formation.

Setting the example, however, goes beyond just following the organizational rules of the Army. NCOs must be present and give maximum effort in everything that they do, from physical training to motor pool maintenance. NCOs must seek self-improvement, and strive to develop the leadership traits and competencies that the Army expects. This is leadership 101, and, as we are implored in our creed: "...all Soldiers are entitled to outstanding leadership."[3] Note the word all. Not just the good Soldiers, not just the high performers, but all. The Soldiers who are below the "good" category need outstanding leadership the most. The second important word is outstanding. Not mediocre, not good, not average, but outstanding leadership is what all NCOs are expected to provide for their Soldiers.

Followership: Understanding the Soldiers We Lead

In writing, often the most complicated situations are solved by a caring leader who knows exactly what to do; inform the subordinates of the standard, tell them how they are not meeting the standard, come up with a plan to help them meet the standard, then finally follow up to make sure they met the standard. While this is true in theory, it fails to account for reality and the complexity of human emotions, the convoluting effects of communication, and the fact that people are not predictable and seldom behave as the manual suggests they should. It turns out that influencing another person to do something that they would not normally do is hard work, and requires extreme dedication from the leader, and the ability to adjust their leadership approach based on the Soldier and the situation.

ADP 6-22 points out that every leader is subordinate to someone, which means all leaders are also followers. Upon beginning their service, both Soldiers and civilians begin by swearing an oath of service to the nation and to the leaders appointed over them. This relationship never changes during one's service, and the best leaders become ardent and trusted followers, who can change roles from leader to follower and back again as the situation dictates.[4] That said, the type of leadership that one provides directly contributes to the types of followership that are created. Leaders who are dedicated to implementing the principles of mission command, empower their subordinates to become better followers by giving trust, underwriting honest mistakes, and creating a shared understanding of the

commander's intent. However, leaders who belittle their subordinates, micromanage operations, and engage in any unproductive leadership behaviors run the risk of creating alienated followers.

The term "alienated follower" comes from Robert Kelly's model of the five types of followers.[5] Kelly describes alienated followers as those individuals that demonstrate high levels of critical thinking but identify as *not part of the group* to a point where they cannot instill the unit's values or mission. This inability to *fit in* usually is the result of a past transgression, purposely or accidentally by a direct leader or business rule that caused the follower to feel slighted by the organization, creating a jaded feeling of disconnect. If left unchecked, alienated followers can become dissonant or even hostile in a workplace, making the climate unsafe and unproductive for other workers and leaders.

The term alienated followers can mislead as it alludes to the idea that an alienated follower is just that, *alienated*. This can lead someone to believe that the follower is alone in their discontent and that their leader must only worry about the malice of a single individual. A single alienated follower could be worrisome in a small team of five to ten, but organizational leaders of hundreds may feel that an alienated follower can do very little to sink the ship. Alienated followers, however, are seldom alone in their feelings of being left behind or left out. Instead, they usually represent the most easily identified member of a larger begrudged group. This group feels a level of comfort in their shared feeling of discontent and will often look to actively recruit new members. They will seek others in the workplace they can lament themselves with and will capitalize on situations in which leaders impart ill-received direction or guidance. They use the logic fallacy of personal attacks to undermine the efforts of their leadership, and they either purposefully or inadvertently develop a full-blown coalition of the begrudged who actively practice insubordination within the ranks.

Leaders must actively seek to understand how they became alienated in the first place. There are usually two types of alienated followers; those that a leader directly created, and those that the leader inherited. When a leader acts in a way that creates an alienated follower, they are the first leader tasked with correcting the problem. It's counter-productive to assume every instance that creates an alienated follower is caused by a counterproductive leader. Even if the leader is doing what is best for an individual or for the unit, somewhere in their communication, something occurred which upset a follower. The leader who is the culprit in this situation can and should be the one to try and fix the problem.

When a leader inherits an alienated follower, however, it becomes necessary for the person who did not isolate a follower to correct the issue. I (Richard) remember watching an outgoing CSM create an alienated follower as a parting gift for me during our transfer of responsibilities.

It was the most awkward lunch I have ever had.

I was taking over as the battalion CSM for a unit that will remain unnamed and was lucky enough to have an overlap with the outgoing CSM, which enabled some left seat / right seat interactions with the unit and staff.

The outgoing CSM had an emergency that required him to go on emergency leave, requiring me to fill in as the interim CSM for a week before our actual change of responsibility.

The outgoing CSM struck me as someone who understood how to get things done.

He had a good relationship with the commander, and he seemed to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the staff. He had already notified the staff that morning that he was going to be out of the loop and that I would be handling all CSM requirements for the week.

Everything seemed to be smooth sailing and the day ahead of his departure and we decided order lunch delivered to the office. After ordering food, my phone rang and I answered to a call from the Operations SGM.

"Good afternoon Sergeant Major. There's been a small change to your schedule" a small, and seemingly irrelevant change to a briefing order for a meeting that was scheduled for two days from now.

"Thank you for the heads up, is there anything you need from me to enable this change?"

"No, Sergeant Major" she said and I promised to pass the information along to the outgoing CSM.

After hanging up, I told the outgoing CSM that it was the Operations SGM and that she was just letting me know about a schedule change for a meeting that would occur while the outgoing CSM was away. While I thought nothing of it, the outgoing CSM's mood changed instantly.

"Why did she call you?" The CSM inquired. "I'm here until tomorrow. Why didn't she call me?"

The tone of the outgoing CSM was extremely hostile, and to be honest, I was taken back by how defensive the CSM had just become.

"Perhaps, based on how we had briefed a temporary shift in our positions, she believed it would be better to notify the person who would be acting as the CSM and attending the meeting?"

"That's not how things work around here! I didn't give her orders to call you instead of me while I am here. I need to know these things," the outgoing CSM seethed. "I'm going to fix this right now!"

The outgoing CSM then called the operations SGM and proceeded to chastise her while sitting across from me. I couldn't tell if he was digging in because he was offended, or if he was trying to put on a show on my behalf. Whatever the reason, the CSM did not let the operations SGM get a word in edgewise.

"You are unprofessional, disloyal," the CSM called the Operations SGM, "and ignorant." I had no idea what to do in this situation.

Was this erratic behavior was due to an underlying issue between the two of them that I was not aware of, or if this was just indicative of the CSM's overall behavior?

Either way, I felt terrible for having any part in the tongue lashing that the CSM was now giving to my future operations SGM.

After the horrific phone call, we ate our lunch mostly in uncomfortable silence, which was only broken by the constant, halfhearted attempts by the CSM trying to justify his actions.

Once we returned to the unit, I noticed that the CSM did not let me out of his site. He kept urging me to finish the day early and leave, while I was honestly hoping for him to do the same. Neither of us spoke with the operations SGM directly and I felt like the outgoing CSM was keeping tabs on me at all times. I decided the best thing to do was to remain patient and address everything the next day under better pretense.

The next day was the first day of the outgoing CSM's emergency leave and I decided to take full advantage of their absence.

The first thing I did was talk with the commander.

I decided that discussing my dislike in how his CSM handled a situation was probably not the best approach, (never talk bad about an outgoing leader…ever) so instead, I just asked him about his leadership style. After asking about other individuals I had met thus far, I asked about the Ops SGM, "Sir, what is your impression of her and how that shop is run?"

"CSM Russell, the unit is blessed to have such talented and loyal operations SGM. She does her job well and we are lucky to have her on the team."

After hearing how the commander felt about the operations SGM, I decided that the issue in this case resided solely with the outgoing CSM.

Approaching her that same morning, I tried to gauge what kind of damage had been done and what it would take to right the ship.

Thankfully, the commander was correct in his assessment of the operations SGM.

I let her know, "the commander thinks the world of you."

"Moving forward," I explained to her, "I am grateful to have you by my side to help guide me as I wade into the unfamiliar waters of being a CSM."

"I'm sorry I apologized for the lunchtime phone call," I told her, owning responsibility.

"The blame resided with me for failing to respect the outgoing CSM's guidance. I relayed the message so poorly that it got you chewed out." I then went on to promise her I would work on my communication skills to avoid any further embarrassment to her or the unit due to my shortcomings. The operations SGM took everything in stride, almost to a fault.

Later I would find out that the short temper and harsh words of the outgoing CSM had created multiple alienated followers within the staff and at the company level command positions. At that point I made it a priority to undo the damage that had been done by the previous CSM. The commander and I spent a great deal of our first year together addressing these dissonant followers and trying to rebuild the trust in the command team that had been dissolved by the former CSM's rash actions and erratic be-

havior. I would like to say that I successfully fixed every relationship and turned every alienated follower into an effective follower. I would also like to say that I was flawless in my duties as a CSM and that I never created any alienated followers, but both statements would be lies. However, I can say that I did my best, and the morale in the unit increased significantly during my tenure.

The moral of this story is that once followers become alienated, it often takes great efforts to get these followers to buy back into the organization, and the application of fiat power (positional power) will not result in improvement. The backbone of the Army must be stronger than that, and it takes true strength to admit culpability in a mistake. Backbones must provide support to everything that happens within an organization, and sometimes it takes an unprecedented application of humility to do this. Alienated followers are transformed one soldier at a time, and the first step in correcting the issues is listening to the Soldier without judgment. Once the Soldiers feels that she or he has been heard, they will be more receptive to your influence.

The Dynamic Operating Environment: The Situation

When I (Robert) was a CSM, a young NCO approached me after a class where I presented a talk on servant leadership and asked me about the various approaches to leadership. We had been doing a series and had previously discussed transactional and transformational leadership. I gave the best answer I had available at the time. "It depends." Situations and context will dictate how a leader should approach the topic. The leadership approach that works the best in the motor pool with a formation of soldiers might prove to be catastrophic under fire. Many leaders rely on feelings to determine when to switch leadership gears. These feelings become more accurate over time and often are learned through experience. This learning through experience is twofold. First, we don't have enough time to experience everything we need to correctly assess the contextual composition of every possible situation we may face. The second is an adage from the leadership sage Doctrine Man, who proclaims "experience is something that you get right after you need it the most."[6]

Complicating the situation further is that no situation is ever the same, and the pace of technological advancement is outpacing our ability to understand it in context. Situations are complicated, and each one is unique and will require unique approaches to leadership. One size will not fit all, and it is the responsibility of the leader, no matter what level, to figure out solutions, corrective measures, and best practices.

Leaders who Develop

After completing my (Robert's) first year as a command sergeant major, I was having a conversation with my commander regarding my next assignment. At the time, I had narrowed it down to two options. I could continue along the Command Selection List (CSL) path in hopes of being selected for a brigade position, or I could apply for the Sergeants Major Academy Fellowship. At the time, I had been in the Army for 23 years, had been an E9 for three years, and still had hopes of becoming a nominative level Command Sergeant Major. I also had a deep love of education and relished the idea of getting another master's degree while in the Army and being able to teach future sergeants major. My commander's advice to me came in the form of a question.

"Would you rather be a king, or a maker of kings?"

I applied for the fellowship the next day.

In the way of development, the Army expects its leaders to prepare themselves, create a positive environment, develop others, and become stewards of the profession.[7] When I thought about my contributions to the Army in the light of developing others, it became crystal clear that I needed to become an instructor. As an instructor of future sergeants major, I realized that I would have an exponential impact on both Soldiers and the Army. Every student that I would educate would go on to train, lead, and develop thousands of additional Soldiers. Those Soldiers would then go on to do the same for countless more. As an instructor, my impact would be felt in ways that I never could have accomplished myself.

Leaders who Prepare Themselves

The world changes quickly and without consultation. The education that engineers learn as freshmen in college will be outdated by the time they are seniors. According to some estimates, technology will double in capacity every 18 months.[8] Change is exponential, and unrelenting. It is critical, then, that NCOs and all Army leaders adopt a personal philosophy that includes a commitment to lifelong learning. In addition, this commitment to lifelong learning must go beyond waiting for what the NCO professional development system gives.

NCOs in the future will have to be smarter. They will have to understand and use technology, know their jobs cold, and learn at an unprecedented pace. NCOs will need to aggressively seek education, take advantage of educational opportunities the Army offers, and read the written word as though their lives depended on it. Due to the pace of change, any-

one can go to any college from anywhere in the world. Even Ivy League schools offer some form of distance education. NCOs and all leaders really should take advantage of this. Regarding educational opportunities, the Army not only offers troop level schools to build competency, but additional opportunities exist to those who know where to look. In 2019, I (Robert) was lucky enough to be able to attend MIT's Seminar XXI, a professional development program focused on national security and global affairs that enlisted Soldiers seldom are allowed to attend, while I was stationed at the Sergeants Major Academy, and it changed the way I think about the world. I wish I had gotten that earlier in my career, because I would have been a more valuable asset to my commander.

Leaders are also readers. If you are wondering what to read, there is a recommended reading list at the end of this book that is broken down by grade. In addition, the Chief of Staff maintains a reading list. While these lists are not inclusive of every great book that leaders should read, it is a great place to start. Reading offers a host of benefits from improving critical thinking to reducing cognitive decline.[9] Read history, read science fiction, read literature, read about leadership theory, it really doesn't matter, just read, you will be better for it, and so will your Soldiers. NCOs should start reading early in their careers and continue throughout their lives.

Achieving the Wrong Way is Bad

When everything else is said and done, winning is what the American people expect the Army to do. In war, there is no room for second place. Therefore, it is no surprise that the Army expects NCOs to get results, a necessarily vague term that encompasses different outcomes for different NCOs at echelon and based upon their military occupational specialty and duty position. That said, the way in which we get results is as important as the results that we get. The Army, nor the nation, will tolerate breaches of moral ethics, nonadherence to the Army Values, violations of the Uniform Code of Military Conduct and Laws of War or toxic behaviors.

I (Robert) have witnessed several incidents of toxic leadership over my 30-year career. It always surprised me when a leader was higher in rank, and they were removed from position for some sort of destructive leadership practice. I always wondered how a leader could be successful in the Army for 25 years, then got relieved for failing to adhere to basic leadership practices. The answer to this question is that toxic leaders get results, and their superiors do not often see that the results are at the expense of their soldiers. Thus, these leaders with toxic traits move up the ranks until they are high enough for enough people to see what they are

doing and then do something about it. For enlisted soldiers this usually happens around the master sergeant rank, and for officers, it tends to be when they are in command positions. Disclaimer, this is only what I have observed, and I have no data to back up this claim to which ranks get relieved the most for toxic behaviors. Soldiers of all ranks get in trouble for a variety of things, they just tend to be more related to personal conduct than leadership.

Counterproductive Leadership: The Backbone of Failure

Leaders will be judged on what's done, but also in the way it was achieved. Leaders who achieve results the right way will align both their ends and their means to the Army Values. This approach is what the NCO Creed means when referring to "outstanding leadership," and all Soldiers are entitled to it.[10]

When it comes to achieving results the wrong way, we are sure that everyone reading this book can think of an example or two. I (Robert) once encountered it at Tripler Army Medical Center, where one of my master sergeants was attempting to build a team. In this instance, the master sergeant produced results. His department was always the first to accomplish mandatory training and he always provided more support than was asked when the leadership needed Soldiers. In short, he got results.

Unfortunately, and unbeknownst to his leadership, was the way in which he achieved results. His actions earned him an investigation and a subsequent court martial when a video leaked of him and his other department leadership hazing newly promoted NCOs. In the footage, sergeants were being made to low-crawl through the sand and do flutter kicks while reciting the NCO Creed, all the while water was being poured over their heads. That may seem benign to some, but that is the definition of hazing, and there is no place for it in the Army. Once the video was brought to the command, a 15-6 was launched, and a slew of additional issues were uncovered. He was leading his Soldiers through intimidation and threats. Ultimately the master sergeant was relieved of his position, and he lost a promising career. As a command, we were embarrassed that it took us so long to uncover this behavior, but we acted once we did and vowed to pay closer attention to the way in which our junior leaders got the job done. This was an overt case of getting results the wrong way. Sometimes poor leadership behaviors can be much more benign.

> *Another case that I witnessed occurred when I was a master sergeant at William Beaumont Army Medical Center (WBAMC).*

In this case, my Troop Commander was relieved of command for threatening behavior and a loss of confidence from the hospital commander. Like in the case of the master sergeant, the commander got results.

The problem was that she would make comments that were bordering on bullying and use her position to threaten the careers of her Soldiers.

The event that brought the issue to light occurred during a Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Program (NCOPD) class that ran over schedule. In medical centers, NCOPDs must occur outside of normal duty hours, to avoid interference with patient care. Thus, at WBAMC, the classes were held at 05:30 or 16:30. In this case the 16:30 class had run over by about 30 minutes, and it was nearing 18:00. The NCOs in attendance were getting restless because the Troop Commander had taken over the class and was lecturing them on her expectations of NCOs.

An NCO eventually stood up and asked to be dismissed.

"Ma'am, my daycare is about to close and I need to pick up my children."

Her response shocked me and she told the NCO, "No, call your spouse, and by the way you might want to think about what you ask me…my next job is going to be at HRC, and I don't forget things."

The commander was suspended within a week and officially relieved from position within a month. This illustrates the point that words are as powerful as actions, and as leaders, we need to think before we speak. In both cases, these leaders reaped what they sowed. Unfortunately, their behavior was likely developed over many years of getting things done at all costs and letting the power of their positions go to their heads.

Productive Leadership

When looking for inspiration, look moments where leaders did it right. Read books on successful leaders, study history, or study other leaders with whom we serve. When I (Robert) think about leaders whom I have served with who did leadership right, I have been fortunate enough to have observed many. One such leader was CSM(R) Gabrial Arnold. Gabe was my Chair when I was a Vice-Chair in the Department of Army Operations at the Sergeants Major Academy. He was a reiterated nominative CSM with

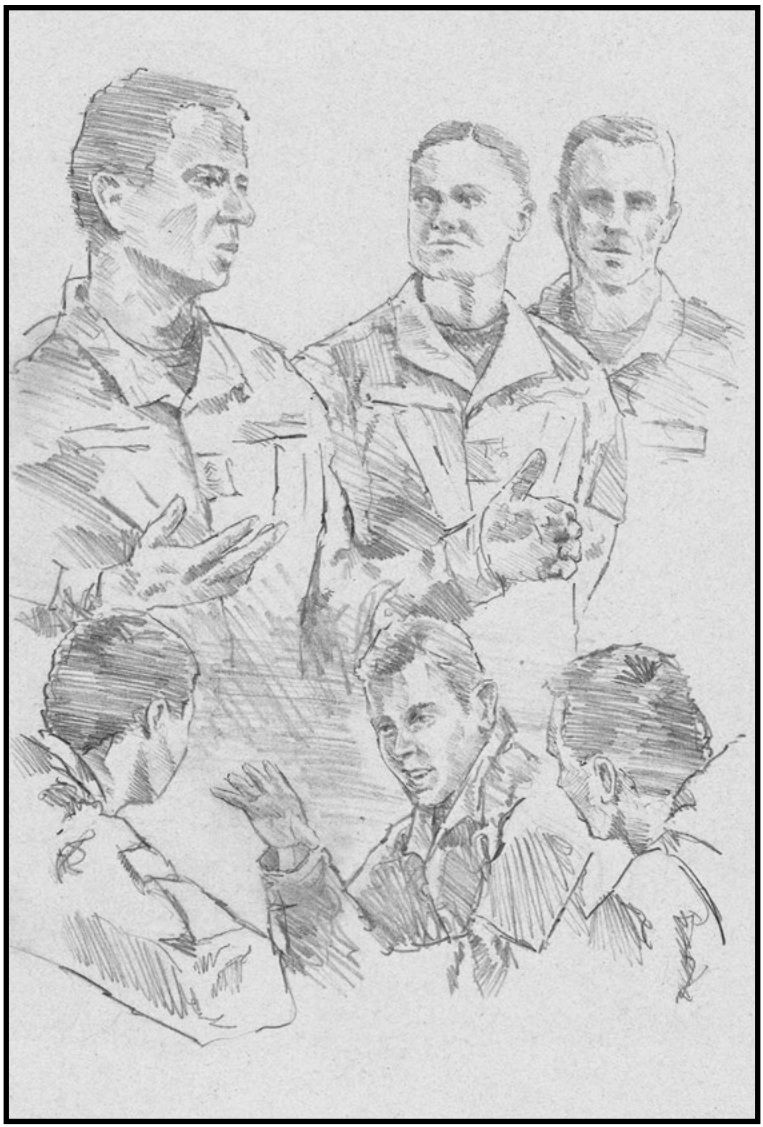


Figure. 4.1. NCO Competencies. Dale Cordes, untitled, 2026, graphite on paper, Lawrence, Kansas.

a chemical background. I had the privilege of working with Gabe while he was on active duty and later as an Army Civilian Professional. Gabe was smart, hardworking, dedicated, and strived to embody the Army Values.

All these things noted, what made him so exemplary was the way that he achieved directives and built the team at the same time. As I watched him, I noticed two things that he would routinely do that enabled him to

achieve great results. First, he would always give people his attention. No matter what he was doing, or what suspense's he had to meet, when someone walked into his office to speak with him, even if the topic was trivial, he would turn away from his computer, face the person, and give them his full attention. You knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that when you were speaking to Gabe that he was listening. How many times have you spoken to a superior and they never looked up from their computer, or would they answer their phone when you were speaking with them? It has happened to me a lot, and I have done it more than I care to admit. Since working with Gabe, I have adopted this simple practice and have always tried to give people my full attention when people asked me to give them my time. Rich and I published a short article in the December 2023 issue of *Army Magazine* titled "Leadership is Time," and we based the concept of this article on Gabe's behavior.[11] This is important because it may seem like you will accomplish less when you give away valuable time to a subordinate for a trivial interaction, but in reality, the time you give will be paid back three-fold in productive behavior from the Soldier. Giving your time helps develop a shared understanding, and cultivates trust between the leader and the led, which then leads to disciplined initiative.[12]

The second thing that Gabe would do was never miss an opportunity to make his employees feel smart. Gabe never tried to be the smartest man in the room, but when you spoke with him, he made you feel smarter. In doing this, Gabe was what Wiseman and McKeown termed a "multiplier" in their book on how the leaders make everyone smarter. Gabe not only made people feel smarter, but he also actually raised the collective intelligence of the group by empowering honest feedback, even if it was criticism about his approach to leadership, without judgment. He would often say, "I want to hear what you think about my performance, and I won't try to defend myself; I'll just listen because I want to know." Ladies and gentlemen, this is what humility looks like. It is also what Carol Dweck termed a "growth mindset" looks like, and it is something every NCO should try to develop, but more the growth mindset in chapter.[13]

> *After working with Gabe for a few months and observing his actions, I asked him, "Sergeant Major, how do you always feel so motivated to give so much of your time and energy to your subordinates each day?"*
>
> *His answer was not what I expected.*
>
> *"I'm not always motivated, in fact, most days, I feel worn out, and don't really need another interruption from my work."*

His next words were simple, but profound.

He said, "leadership is just work, you don't have to feel good to do it."

I say this was profound because I had always thought of leadership as more of something you could feel versus just something that you do. After reflecting on Gabe's words for some time, I concluded that he was right, you don't have to be in a great mood or state of mind to provide great leadership.

Leadership is a verb. It is something you do.

Great leaders do not need to feel like providing outstanding leadership every single day, they just need to do it.

Over the last two centuries, NCOs have gone from the uneducated rank and file to a professionalized corps that continues to add value to the Army in new and unique ways. While long history of developing the non-commissioned officer has not been perfect, the NCO corps has continues to march forward, and today is the envy of every army in the world. Today the US Army has NCOs who possess the character traits and attributes expected of professional leaders and are dynamic performers in a multitude of complex environments and domains.

Questions for Discussion

- **Traits vs.Competencies**

  The chapter distinguishes between traits as nouns and competencies as verbs. How does this distinction shape the way you evaluate your own leadership performance?

- **Formal vs. Informal Leadership**

  Leadership is defined as influence, not rank. Who are the informal leaders in your formation, and how can you leverage or develop their influence?

- **Setting the Example**

  The chapter emphasizes being "agnostic about the standard." How do you enforce standards consistently, even when you may personally disagree with them?

- **Outstanding Leadership for All**

  The NCO Creed states that all Soldiers are entitled to outstanding leadership. What does "outstanding" look like in daily practice, especially for low-performing Soldiers?

- **Creating or Inheriting Alienated Followers**

  Reflecting on the concept of alienated followers, how might leaders unintentionally create dissonance within their teams? What steps can you take to identify and reintegrate alienated followers?

- **Leadership and Followership**

  Since all leaders are also followers, how does your approach to followership influence how you expect others to follow you?

- **Situational Leadership in a Dynamic Environment**

  The chapter suggests that leadership style depends on context. How do you determine when to apply transactional, transformational, or servant leadership approaches?

- **Developing Others: King or Kingmaker?**

  Would you rather be a "king" or a "maker of kings"? How does your answer influence the way you mentor and develop subordinates?

- **Achieving Results the Right Way**

  The chapter provides examples of leaders who got results through toxic behaviors. How can organizations detect when success is being achieved at the expense of people?

- **Leadership Is Work**

  The phrase "Leadership is a verb. It is something you do." challenges the idea that leadership is based on mood or personality. What daily disciplines can you practice to ensure consistent leadership regardless of how you feel?

Recommended Further Reading

"NCOs' Role in Multi-Domain Operations," by Sgt. Maj. Clayton Dos Santos, *The NCO Journal*, February 2023.

"Competence is my Watchword," by Command Sgt. Maj Kirk R. Coley, *The NCO Journal*, March 2025.

Endnotes

1. ADP 6-22, Para 1-87.

2. John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (HarperCollins, 2022), Law 2.

3. U.S. Army, "NCO Creed," accessed 10 October 2023, https://www.army.mil/values/nco.html .

4. ADP 6-22, Para 1-102 to 1-104.

5. Robert Kelley, "In Praise Of Followers." *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 66, no 6, (November 1988): 142-148.

6. Doctrine Man, "20 Salient Points Missed by Carl von Clausewitz," YouTube (Website) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhUTUr0ha-o.

7. ADP 6-22, Para 1-67.

8. Max Roser, Hannah Ritchie, & Edouard Mathiew, "What is Moore's Law." Our World In Data (website), 28 March 2023, https://ourworldindata.org/moores-law.

9. Rebecca Joy Stanbrough, "Benefits of Reading Books: How it Can Positively Affect Your Life," *Healthline*, 15 October 2019, https://www.healthline.com/health/benefits-of-reading-books#increases-empathy.

10. U.S. Army, "NCO Creed," accessed 10 October 2023, https://www.army.mil/values/nco.html.

11. Robert Nelson & Richard Russell, "Leadership is Time," *Army Magazine*, 2 December 2023.

12. ADP 6-0*, Mission Command: The Command and Control of Army Forces* (Army Publishing Directorate, July 2019), Para 1-59.

13. Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Random House, 2019).

Chapter 5

How to Empower Soldiers

The Army's approach to command and control is the philosophy of mission command[1] Like the character traits and attributes form the "backbone" of Army leadership doctrine, mission command forms the "backbone" of the Army's command and control processes. While this is not a book on mission command, it is important to know that *ADP 6-0, Mission Command, the Command and Control of Army Forces* explains that seven principles support the philosophy of mission command that are focused on decentralized execution of Army missions. These principles are competence, mutual trust, shared understanding, commander's intent, mission orders, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance.[2]

Mission Command

The Army's approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation.

Enabled by the principles of:

- **Competence**
- **Mutual trust**
- **Shared understanding**
- **Commander's intent**
- **Mission orders**
- **Disciplined initiative**
- **Risk acceptance**

Figure 5.1. Mission Command.

These principles are interrelated and when manifested into a physical reality, they empower soldiers to take initiative based on the information they are presented with while still allowing commanders to maintain control of the operation. There is a subtle difference between influence and empowerment. Army leadership influences, but mission command empowers. This concept is the Army's version of Aristotle's "Golden Mean," the philosophy

that acknowledges "all virtues lie in the middle way between two extreme states: excess and deficiency. [3] While no one principle is more important than the other, in our opinion, trust is the first amongst equals.

Giving Trust

The first step in empowering soldiers to act is to trust them. While it sounds simple, giving trust is one of the hardest habits a leader must develop. Developing trust is difficult because junior NCOs tend to get few opportunities to practice giving trust. In some cases, the lack of a supportive work environment or top cover of our command prevented a safe place to make and learn from mistakes. While the Army points out that days of the "zero defect Army ' ' ended in the 2000s, there are still echoes of not accepting failure that terrifies NCOs and commanders alike.[4] Because military mistakes can have significant impacts on lives, missions, and careers, leaders tend to avoid risks that may result in a mistake. When NCOs learn that giving trust is risky while they are young, that fear becomes ingrained by the time they are Senior NCOs, and indelible by the time they become sergeants major. This is a problem, because when most senior NCOs in a formation are fearful of giving trust, this fear pervades throughout an organization.

The cure is found in the embodiment of another mission command principle, risk acceptance. The previous edition of ADP 6-0 from 2012 did not say "risk acceptance," it said, "accept prudent risk."[5] The idea behind the words "prudent risk" was to empower commanders to accept risk, but not unnecessarily. Words hold power, and the problem with this imprecise language is that people could not agree on the definition of the word "prudent." This becomes even more problematic when the brigade commander has a conservative idea of the word prudent, and the battalion commander has a liberal interpretation. In this situation, the company commander, and the NCOs within the company would become paralyzed because they would not have a shared understanding of what was prudent and what was unnecessary. It only created a situation for leaders to not accept any risk and not trust their soldiers to act in the absence of orders.

The Army recognized this linguistic problem and modified its mission command doctrine to encourage leaders to accept risk. In the Army, jobs and missions are inherently risky. Competence, another principle of mission command, and familiarity both empower trust. All soldiers have an inherent level of competence once they have been through some version of a rigorous training program. Lacking familiarity with a given soldier impedes us from giving them trust. It may be much better to trust until proven otherwise.

I (Robert) struggled with giving trust when I first became Sergeant in 1999. I had several friends that were NCOs and always told me how important your Noncommissioned Officer Evaluations Reports (NCOERs) were to your success in the Army. While this is true to some degree, NCOERs are not the end goal, nor did they ultimately define my professional successes. In my youth I believed my peers, and it created problems. I feared letting my subordinates complete a task in case they failed. Any of their failures, I reasoned with myself, would end up reflecting poorly on my evaluation. So, I took up the practice of doing their work poorly or micromanaging to such a degree that they had zero ability to apply initiative or creativity in solving a task. I did this for about six months before a specialist finally called me out by saying "Sergeant, while I am not yet an NCO, I have earned my rank, and I know how to do this. Trust me to get it done, I don't need you breathing over my shoulder the entire way."

The task I was asking the soldier to do was to pick up some supplies from the supply room.

When this happened, at first, I was taken aback, how dare a specialist talk to a sergeant in that tone, with those words, and without reverence. Luckily, I was smart enough to keep my mouth shut and think about what my soldier had told me. It turns out, I had a problem that I could not recognize without my soldier's input. I lacked the ability to give trust, and it was for selfish reasons. My selfishness stemmed from my fear that I would receive a poor evaluation if anything went wrong under my watch. For a young NCO who thought he knew everything there was about leadership, this was a hard pill to swallow, but I did it. From that day on, I made a change that would stay with me through the end of my career.

I was going to trust soldiers with wild abandon, until they proved beyond a reasonable doubt that they did not deserve it. I was also going to accept failure, unless it was illegal, unethical, or immoral. In making these two minor changes to my core beliefs, I was able to start empowering soldiers to not only take disciplined initiative, another principle of mission command, but to feel valued by their leader. Later in my career, my beliefs on trust were expanded to start to think dif-

ferently about trusting and empowering NCOs from an organizational perspective, and it all started with a Navy PT test.

The Navy Physical Fitness Test

Each service loves to joke about the other service's physical readiness tests. But in truth, each service has spent countless hours researching and developing tests that suit the unique needs specific to their duties and responsibilities.

In 2003, I (Robert) was a sergeant first class assigned to Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) at Fort Sam Houston (long before the days of joint bases). Since this story is about fitness tests, let me provide some background. In 2003, the Army conducted Army Physical Fitness Tests (APFT) as a measurement of physical readiness, which was what the Army did prior to the Army Combat Fitness Test. During that time, our company had a policy that required a company to lead APFT every April and October. If a person needed a PT test that was outside of the April or October window, they could arrange to have an NCO give them an ACFT if they obtained approval from the company first sergeant or commander and coordinated for a representative from the company training room to be present. This was standard practice across all companies and was normal for other units I had been in as well. Since BAMC had small contingents of personnel from other services, those personnel were responsible for coordinating for their fitness tests and turning in the official results to our company for tracking.

In October of 2003, I oversaw the large company APFT. It was a week-long event, and tests were conducted four times per day. At the time, my company consisted of around 500 soldiers, and it took that long to get everyone tested without interfering with patient care. We had a small cadre of NCOs give each test, then I would collect the cards and score them at the end of the day.

Late one day, after the completion of our afternoon APFT, I was at the company grading the day's tests when two chief petty officers (Navy Senior NCOs) entered the room to report their PT scores. Interestingly, they did not have any sort of PT card in their hands.

I chuckled to myself and thought, "It looks like the Navy doesn't have any standards; I have to see this." I watched in disbelief as the chief petty officers reported that they tested each other just that morning as they provided their scores to the training NCO.

To my amazement, the NCO accepted their scores without complaint.

I could not believe what I had just witnessed. As the chief petty officers started to leave, I asked them, "who validated your scores?" "Doesn't the Navy want someone to check on you to make sure you are not lying about your scores?" It was now their turn to laugh, and I'll never forget what one of them said. "The Navy trusts us." Seeing the disbelief on my face, the other chief petty officer added, "the Navy trusts us with massive ships, why wouldn't they trust to report our fitness scores truthfully." At that instance, a light bulb went off in my head.

The Army trusts NCOs to make life and death decisions in combat. I trust that the NCOs within my charge were competent to conduct their wartime mission without me looking over their shoulders.

Why does my company leadership not trust their NCOs to grade an APFT without company oversight? What I really meant though was, why do I not trust my NCOs to be honest?

I made up my mind at that moment that if I were ever to be the first sergeant, I would empower my NCOs to do small things as well as big things. I had learned a lesson on trust as a young sergeant, and now it was reinforced in my mind as a sergeant first class. Moving forward, I made it a part of my basic leadership practices that NCOs would be able to give fitness tests at their own discretion. All I required was that they inform me of when and where they were going to do it, if I wanted to take one myself or knew of someone else who needed one. I am sure that I am not the only person in the Army who thinks like this, but I suggest that we as an NCO corps need to do more of this type of thing to demonstrate that we trust our subordinates. If we can trust our NCOs on the battlefield, we can trust them to do the right thing in garrison.

Training Builds Competence: Competence Builds Trust

A key aspect of building enough trust to empower subordinates is found in competence. ADP 6-0 states that competence is a principle of mission command, as it is directly related to the amount of trust that commanders are willing to give. In situations where units are newly formed or have low levels of collective training, it is expected that the commander will want to be more involved in operations than units who are well trained

and have been together for longer periods of time.[61] In short, giving up control requires not only trust in our soldiers, but trust in their training.

US Army Ranger School is a school like no other. The tenants of leadership are taught and practiced in harsh environments and without the luxuries of food, shelter, or adequate sleep. Students are expected to carry out operations and display sound decision-making and resiliency in the toughest of conditions. If a leader makes a bad decision, the ramifications can be felt throughout the entire class. Miss a movement time, lose sleep that night. Fail to request resupply correctly, or fail to maintain security during resupply operations, say goodbye to your meals for the next few days. Fail to execute the mission, reset several hours later and do it again, knowing that those hours will be lost during that night's rest plan. The idea is not to torture young Army leaders. The idea is to ensure that knowledge and skills learned in the comfortable environments of formalized classes can be applied and executed in adverse conditions. This whole concept is tied to academic scaffolding, in which content progresses from simple to complex over time. As skills are mastered, more difficult content is added. In the case of Ranger school, the content is made as difficult as possible to prepare students for the rigors of combat.

This scaffolded approach also prepares leaders to inspire, motivate, and drive soldiers to mission accomplishment when their bodies and minds are telling them to quit. As it also prepares leaders to inspire, motivate, and drive soldiers to accomplish missions when their bodies and minds are telling them to quit.

Empowered to Fail

We learn more from our failures than from our successes, that is why it is called trial and error, not trial and success. Learn the first time you make a mistake and make deliberate attempts not to repeat it. Better yet, learn from other people's mistakes. I (Robert) have often told my soldiers that it is okay to learn from other people's mistakes since they don't have the time to make them all themselves. I know that they understood this concept, but unfortunately, they did not always listen.

> *"I know how this is going to go, but I am going to let you do it anyway."*
>
> *This is what I was thinking when one of my NCOs wanted to add a full contact combative event to our soldier and NCO of the Year competition.*
>
> *In 2018, I was the CSM of the 31st Combat Support Hospital at Fort Bliss Texas, and we were planning our NCO and Sol-*

dier of the Year competition. I had selected an NCOIC and had given him full mission command of the event. During the first IPR he was going over the lane concepts when he mentioned that he wanted one of the lanes to be a full contact combatives lane. While I completely value combatives and think that every soldier should at least be level one certified, I tend not to like including combatives in competitions where untrained soldiers may compete. I say this because people are competitive, and those who are untrained in combatives tend to attempt to use muscle in place of technique. This usually leads to an injury.

I explained my concern to my NCOIC, and he assured me that he would keep a close watch on the competitors, and they would be graded on execution of the moves rather than the outcome of the match. He thought the risk of someone getting hurt was negligible, and I thought it was extremely likely. I eventually acquiesced to his request under the condition that he conducted a thorough deliberate risk assessment worksheet, and an even more thorough safety briefing before the event. Unfortunately, I was going to be TDY during the execution of the event, so I informed him that he had my full trust in making sure none of our competitors were injured.

By this point, you know how this story ends. The NCO followed my guidance, and there were no injuries during the competition. However, at the conclusion of the graded portion, he allowed the soldiers to go full speed and full contact. One of the soldiers involved hit their head hard enough to have to go to the hospital to be evaluated for a concussion. Fortunately, he did not sustain a more permanent injury. The NCOIC reported this information back to me with his proverbial tail between his legs and awaited my wrath. I could tell that he had learned a valuable lesson, and I would not have a problem like this in the future. So, I told him that I was disappointed, but that a soldier had just invested heavily in his education as a noncommissioned officer, and I expected that this sort of thing would not happen again.

It didn't happen again, and over the years we have kept in contact, and I had the honor to see this NCO graduate from the Sergeants Major Academy and go on to hopefully become a better sergeant major than myself. To me this is the ultimate

embodiment of empowerment when someone follows in your footsteps in hopes of leading as you did. Thus, empowering subordinates to act, or even fail is something that transcends organizations, and is important even outside of the Army.

The Language of Empowerment: Communication Theory 101

If you cannot communicate with your soldiers, you cannot empower them. Words have meaning. The tone you use when delivering those words also informs the listener how to interpret them. The gestures used while speaking the words also communicate your meaning. Words left unsaid have impact. Actions have meaning, and so do inactions.

When it comes to communication theory, one of the most prevalent frameworks is known as Locutionary Force Theory.[7] This theory suggests that communication can be understood through three different forces: locutionary force, illocutionary force, and perlocutionary force. The locutionary force is the words that are used in the conversation. "I would like a Coke" is the locutionary force. The illocutionary force is what is implied by the locutionary force. The illocutionary force of "I would like a Coke" can take on several different implications. It could mean that you are thirsty. It could mean that I expect you to get me a Coke. It could mean that I am tired and need the energy boost that some caffeine would provide but really don't want one. It could mean that I am on a diet, and wish I could have a Coke, but won't because of my diet. The "Coke" could also mean that I have an illegal drug problem and want a fix. In most cases the illocutionary force is determined by the tone of locutionary force and the nonverbal communication that occurs with it. The perlocutionary force is what happens. How did the receiver understand the words that were spoken, and what did they do? In the example of the Coke, the perlocutionary force might be that I got a cold tasty beverage placed in my hand. Adding to the complexity of communication are the regional differences that the same word can mean. Growing up in Northern California, I would often ask for a Coke when ordering a meal at McDonalds. The employee would then respond with what kind? We have 7-Up, Mountain Dew…etc. My spouse is from Michigan, and she refers to a soft drink as a "pop." Outside of the United States, Diet Coke is known as Coke Lite. This really starts to make one wonder what "I would like a Coke" really means.

It is critical that NCOs understand this theory, and just how hard communication is because communication is one of the hardest things we do in the Army. Often, the illocutionary force that words generate are different than what was intended because of differing interpretations of the non-

verbal communication surrounding them. Put simply: soldiers can read context clues and infer nonverbal communication. If you are unclear in your guidance and uncertain with your direction, the words and tone you communicate can be misinterpreted. Transparency helps here, as does intentional practice in communicating clearly and simply to subordinates, colleagues, and leadership. Locutionary Force Theory can provide a framework, but the essential skills of effective soldiering require noncommissioned officers to think about how to effectively facilitate a climate of Mission Command through their intentions, words and actions.

Communication is in the Eye of the Beholder

Communication occurs in the eye of the beholder, not the sender. If soldiers and leaders in your unit were asked about the top five issues that exist within the organization, chances are "communication" will make the list every time. Yet, many of the Commander's Priorities I witnessed throughout my career all involved prioritizing communication or flattening the communication process. Most people believe they communicate effectively. This is a true paradox. Communication is bad everywhere, commanders tend to prioritize communication, and everyone is a good communicator.

Like I said, communication is the most difficult thing we do. People recognize that it is a problem, prioritize fixing it, and yet, communication somehow remains broken. What is an NCO to do? Here are some suggestions developed over a career's experience.

First, never shoot the messenger, the first time you yell at someone for bringing you a problem, word will get around (communication is never broken within the informal channels) and people will stop talking to you.

Next, and most importantly, never shut people down publicly (see the section below), when you are in a position of power, people will look at your nonverbal cues when you are communicating and will derive their meaning from it.

Last and most important, practice active listening.[8] which puts focus on the person speaking, nod appropriately, repeat back the key points of the message within your own words, and ask for clarification whenever something is unclear. Have your subordinates do this when you are speaking as well.

I Never Said That: Organizational Communication and Power

NCOs also need to consider organizational communication. Within organizations, positional power (the power that a leader gains from their position; the simplest tool of influence) can often interfere with the nor-

Listening Actively

An important part of effective two-way communication is active listening. Although the most important purpose of listening is to comprehend the sender's message, listeners should provide an occasional indication to the speaker that they are attentive, such as a head nod when face-to-face or stating "roger" when using radio or telephonic communication. Active listening involves avoiding interruption and keeping mental or written notes (when possible) of important points or items for clarification. Good listeners will understand the message being sent in terms of its content, urgency, and the emotion with which it is communicated.

Of note, one of the common complaints surrounding active listening is that it takes more time than just listening. However, while active listening consumes additional time during the initial conversation, it's less time in the long run because people will gain a better understanding of the message during its initial transmission. Think about the time you could save if you never had to repeat yourself.

Figure 5.2. Active Listening.

mal communication processes. This issue is compounded as NCOs begin moving up in rank; that is to say, the higher you go, the more your rank and position will interfere with the meaning of your message. General officers are taught this within their professional development system because communication can really go off the rails if a general officer says something they do not mean in sarcasm, and their subordinates execute it as an attempt to show initiative. Subordinates can compound this issue by interpreting the illocutionary force (the result of people understanding utterances differently) of an utterance in an unintended way. This results in putting words in the mouths of leaders who never said them. I (Robert) once worked for a general officer who commonly told people, "If you hear that I said something, and it does not make sense, please ask me...I am often amazed at some of the things I have said."

While many of the organizational communication issues stem from the commander, NCOs who work with these officers must understand that they are not immune. Anytime a message must be transmitted from one person to another, there is a chance of miscommunication. In fact, I (Robert) would often relate the famed Murphy's Law to communication, but

rather than "What can go wrong, will go wrong," I would say "*what can be miscommunicated will be miscommunicated, and if there are both positive and negative interpretation of a message, the negative version will be understood*." Rank, position, or power can influence this interpretation for the worse. People want to please you. No one wants to bring the first sergeant bad news, let alone the command sergeant major. Because of this, soldiers will unintentionally edit or censor themselves to make communication fit within their personal biases or paradigms.

To counter the organizational communication problems that are confounded by power, NCOs must over communicate their message by a factor of 10, which is a metaphorical way of saying that the message needs to be communicated repeatedly and in various ways to ensure that it is clearly understood by everyone. Never miss an opportunity to clarify or give examples of what you mean when attempting to communicate. Whenever possible, tell a story to illustrate your point. People remember stories far easier than they do rote information.

The method of communication is also important to consider when attempting to avoid misinterpretations. Face-to-face communication will always be the best method. The second-best method of communication would be to use the telephone. The third method is to send a text message, and the least effective method is to send an email. Regardless of how you prefer to communicate, it is important to ensure the method you use aligns with the urgency of the message. Communication efforts can be undermined if urgent messages are sent via texts or e-mails because those methods are not as fast or accurate as face-to-face or telephone communications.

Communication is often more complicated by power dynamics. People are sometimes intimidated by your rank, position, or expertise and it prevents a free exchange of ideas or intentions. This is a problem because some leaders are far removed from the daily actions of their soldiers, only hearing about extremely good or extremely bad news. If you are a platoon sergeant, and you hear something obscure from one of the soldiers, there is a good chance that other soldiers are saying the same thing, just not to you. In cases like these, it is best to address the issue in the most benign way possible. Don't get angry, just address the issue in a low – stakes manner that subordinates can easily interpret. "Hey, I just heard that…, and I'd like to clarify." By handling miscommunication in this manner, you will encourage other soldiers to keep you informed and talk to you when something doesn't sound right.

Start with Why

Simon Sinek, a business leadership expert, is recognized for his work on organizational behavior and leadership philosophy. His most influential book, *Start with Why*, explores the fundamental idea that effective leaders inspire action by clearly communicating the purpose, the "why," behind a mission or goal. Sinek argues that when individuals understand the deeper reason behind a task or directive, they are more likely to take ownership and initiative, often going beyond what is simply required. This perspective is especially valuable for NCOs, whose role is not only to execute missions but also to develop and lead soldiers. By applying Sinek's principles, NCOs can foster a sense of purpose and motivation within their teams, empowering soldiers to act with greater autonomy, discipline, and commitment. In environments where clarity of purpose can mean the difference between mission success and failure, embracing the "why" can enhance cohesion, trust, and leadership effectiveness across all levels of the force.[9]

The Army's Mission Command doctrine aligns with Sinek's concept of "starting with why". One of the principles of mission command is "create a shared understanding."[10] This creation of understanding falls squarely on the shoulders of the commander; however, NCOs have a critical role in ensuring that it happens. NCOs must always take the time to communicate the "why" to their soldiers regardless of the mission. This ranges from conducting Spring cleanup to preparing for an assault on an objective within a combat environment. If soldiers know why they are performing a task, it enables them to adjust when the plan fails. This is known as disciplined initiative.[11] The concept of disciplined initiative is important because "the enemy gets a vote." Starting with why will improve the shared understanding of the commander's intent and enable both initiative and creativity in soldiers, which are critically important abilities when the enemy votes not to follow our plans.

Empowering Organizational Rhetoric

Rhetoric is the subtle meaning found within organizational language. Effective rhetoric manifests as the skillful use of language achieving a specific goal, to include the development of myths and legends. Organizations that have been around long enough to become institutions have well defined rhetoric, heroes and myths that are used as examples of what to do, and what to be. Therefore, NCOs ought to make deliberate efforts to understand the organizational rhetoric within their unit and wield it to encourage the kind of action they want their soldiers to engage in. As you

reflect on this, ask yourself what terms does your organization use to convey meanings that are unique to your unit? The word "stat" means one thing in a hospital and something completely different in an educational environment. The word "repeat" means something different in an Artillery unit than it does in a dining facility. Leaders need to know the words that their organization uses and the potentially unique meanings behind them to communicate more clearly. Behavior is encouraged and manipulated by words. Influenced by words might be a gentler way to put this, but in many cases organizational rhetoric is nothing more than employing popular psychology aimed at producing certain behavioral outcomes. A case study of America's history of Jaywalking illustrates this clearly.

Before 1905, streets in America looked nothing like the public road spaces and traffic patterns that exist today. Instead of congested paths of automobiles, streets were rich with pedestrians, bicycles, and horse drawn wagons. Children played openly in the streets and small merchants sold their goods from stands set up in the middle of the busy streets. While the idea of roadways lending themselves to all types of commuters sounds good to most, there was a small, but growing segment of the population who disagreed. Motorists were starting to emerge on the roadways in the larger cities like New York and Los Angeles, and with their presence, a new problem manifested. As cars became more prevalent, so did the fatalities involving automobiles. The earliest cars were not reliable and issues like unexpectedly jolting forward or failing breaks were common. Pair these deficiencies with overcrowded streets of children and the elderly and you have a recipe for grave catastrophe. By the early 1920s, Automobile related fatalities were soaring. Pedestrians had done little to change their behaviors and most motorists lacked the skills to avoid the chance of colliding with foot traffic on the overcrowded rows. It was clear that something had to be done. Those without access or opportunity to own vehicles believed rules would be made to outlaw the use of automobiles in crowded areas, but the automobile manufacturers and those wealthy enough to own cars decided that America would take a different path.

Several car manufacturers decided to run campaigns in local papers calling the limitations placed on domestic automotive technology as Unamerican. They pushed that by regulating foot

traffic to the sides of the road or sidewalks and having pedestrians cross the roads only at corners, they could ensure the safety of pedestrians and the strength of Americans represented in automotive power. The problem was that even after a successful petition to create local laws in several large cities to ban pedestrians walking on the streets, very few people truly paid attention to the laws. Moreover, local police, who were also on foot, had no desire to enforce the laws restricting the flow of pedestrian traffic to the sides of the roads. With the unsuccessful attempt at compliance through legislature, the automotive companies went to work with a new approach, the title of Jaywalker.

At the time, "Jay" was a slanderous name for an unsophisticated individual from the country, who was painted as naive to the ways of a city. The original adaptation of Jay referred to a Jay-driver. A Jaydriver was an individual who didn't know or understand the rudimentary traffic laws that both automobiles and horse drawn carriages needed to follow. They would do things like drive on the wrong side of the road or make unpredictable turns without any form of signal. While Jaydriver was negative towards automobile drivers, the new counter term, Jaywalker was focused on pedestrians who refused to follow the new traffic laws regarding their restriction to the sides of the roads. Unlike the term Jaydriver, which was only spread through gossip, the term Jaywalker was fully supported by the automobile manufacturing giants. They ran ads in the local papers portraying jaywalkers as ignorant and inconsiderate buffoons who didn't follow the laws either because they were too stupid to understand them, or too self-indulgent to think of what is best for society. A correlation of automobile focused individuals even went so far as to name the criminal act of walking in the middle of the road or crossing anywhere other than in an authorized area to Jaywalking, which is what we still call it today.

Using rhetoric, those that were in power were able to change the perception of who was at fault in automotive fatality. With the use of published ads, safety parades, and a focused campaign, automotive companies were able to make the pedestrian liable in automobile versus pedestrian encounters, instead of either the driver, or the faulty vehicle. While the concept of jaywalking has

evolved along with the laws surrounding it over the last century, the idea of using rhetoric to shape behavior has not, and a well-informed leader can empower the desired behaviors through the application of rhetorical phrases.

Figure 5.3. History of Jaywalking. Joseph Stromberg, "The Forgotten History of Jaywalking," *Vox*, November: 2015. https://www.vox.com/2015/1/15/7551873/jaywalking-history

The Army has some commonly used rhetoric that influences soldier behavior and attitudes, even if subtly. Terms like "sick-call ranger," "pogey-bait," and "profile rider" are informal, yet they carry strong cultural weight. For instance, calling someone a "sick-call ranger" implies that they are abusing the medical system for personal convenience, discouraging frequent visits to the medic. Similarly, "pogey-bait," a somewhat humorous term for snack food – conveys a message that bringing personal treats to the field is unnecessary or unprofessional. And "profile rider" carries the insinuation that someone on a medical profile is taking advantage of the system to avoid duty, which can pressure soldiers to minimize or downplay their legitimate medical limitations.

While these terms are often shared in jest, they shape behavior in very real ways. This is organizational rhetoric in action, language used within the institution to guide, limit, or encourage specific behaviors. Much like the rhetorical strategy behind the term "jaywalking," these Army terms serve as behavioral guardrails. The Army's internal rhetoric operates similarly. While there is no formal policy defining a "sick-call ranger," the term's cultural presence discourages soldiers from seeking medical care unless necessary, reinforcing values like toughness, resilience, and self-reliance. However, as with the "jaywalking" example, this kind of rhetoric can also carry unintended consequences. Just as the "jaywalking" narrative obscured broader systemic issues like poor urban design or lack of pedestrian infrastructure, terms like "profile rider" or "sick-call ranger" can contribute to a culture where soldiers feel shame for taking care of their health, potentially leading to underreporting of injuries or delayed treatment.

These terms don't just exist in policy or doctrine, they live in interpersonal communication, day-to-day conversations, and peer interactions. As leaders, it is critical to recognize how these rhetorical shortcuts influence soldier behavior and morale. Organizational rhetoric can be a powerful tool for reinforcing values, but it must be used thoughtfully and with awareness of its broader implications. Ultimately, effective communication requires

more than just relaying information, it demands an understanding of how language, culture, and perception intersect. If you cannot clearly communicate what needs to be done, or if your message is undermined by the unintended baggage of the words you choose, you will fail to fully empower your soldiers.

Empowering Soldiers to Challenge the Status Quo

In 1899, writer and philosopher Elbert Hubbard published a short essay titled *A Message to Garcia*, which would go on to become one of the most widely distributed pieces of writing in American military and business culture. The story is a fictionalized account inspired by real events during the Spanish-American War.[12] It centers on a U.S. Army officer named Andrew Rowan, who was tasked with delivering a message from President McKinley to General Calixto García, a Cuban insurgent leader fighting Spanish colonial forces. García's whereabouts were uncertain, and the mission required navigating hostile territory with minimal guidance or support.

What made Rowan's fictional portrayal so compelling, and what turned Hubbard's essay into a cultural phenomenon, was that, in the story, Rowan accepts the mission without hesitation, without asking any clarifying questions, and without complaint. He takes the message and disappears into the jungles of Cuba, ultimately completing the task with stoic determination and minimal fanfare. Rowan's unquestioning commitment and self-starting attitude became the central moral of the story. Over the decades, the essay was republished millions of times, translated into dozens of languages, and made required reading in countless leadership training programs, including those in the US Army.

The Army has embraced *A Message to Garcia* as a parable of mission command, personal initiative, and unshakable duty. It resonates with the military ideal of completing the mission no matter the obstacles and has been cited repeatedly as an example of the kind of soldierly behavior that should be modeled and rewarded. In this narrative, Rowan represents the ideal subordinate: one who acts decisively, doesn't second-guess orders, and doesn't need handholding.

But while the appeal of such a story is clear, especially within a hierarchical organization built on discipline and obedience, the essay warrants re-examining with a more critical lens. Mission accomplishment is essential, but blind execution without understanding, questioning, or adapting to context is not always desirable in the complex and often ambiguous environments in which today's Army operates. In real-life military opera-

tions, asking questions, seeking clarity, and ensuring shared understanding can be vital to success and the safety of the force.

All leaders want their soldiers to follow lawful orders, but leaders also want their feedback, input, or even questions if orders are unclear. In fact, the concept outlined in ADP 6-0 of creating a shared understanding to enable mission command is based on the premise of getting the soldier to understand the mission as well as the commander if the enemy does not act as anticipated. Thus, disciplined initiative, taking action within the constraints of the commander's intent, is critical on the modern battlefield where the missions are far more complex than delivering a piece of mail.[13]

Strong NCOs desire their soldiers to challenge themselves in the way that Rowan did in that they should be able to accomplish difficult missions with as little guidance as possible. To empower soldiers to do this, reinforce the principles of mission command and build competence within the ranks.[14] Once soldiers reach high levels of competence and trust, they can then challenge the status quo related to blindly following orders. However, this is easier said than done. There is a time to ask questions, a time to execute the mission, and a fine line exists between asking a question and insubordination when the enemy is at the gate. Still, soldiers must know that their voices will be heard should they have information that provides a course of action that is contrary to the order they were given.

Empowering Soldiers to Challenge Themselves

Even the best soldiers need to challenge themselves to grow. Sometimes they will do this on their own, however all soldiers benefit from the help of their NCO. Soldiers and subordinate leaders who are left to their own accord have the potential to become bored easily. Even soldiers who only face easy challenges will start to treat them as routine and potentially become complacent. This is one of the reasons why the Army believes in the philosophy of constantly challenging soldiers to step outside of their comfort zones and attempt to learn new and relevant information or accomplish new feats. This idea of continuous improvement is embedded in every aspect of Army life, from our Leadership Requirements Model, to our encouragement of lifelong learning.[15] Why leaders we force soldiers to seek continuous improvement in their Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes? When leaders encourage soldiers to improve their knowledge, skills and attitudes, soldiers to follow through are more dynamic in solving ill-structured problems. Ultimately, leaders build resilient, intelligent, problem-solving soldiers ready to assume the next promotion or position of special thrust and authority to improve the overall unit accomplish-

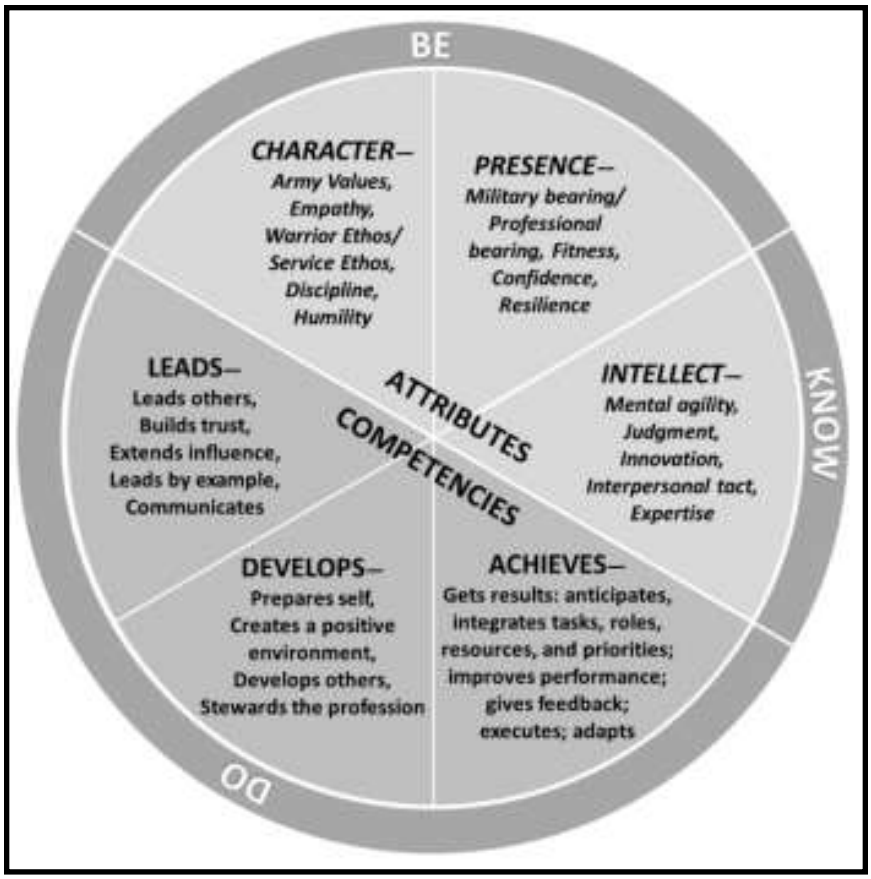


Figure 5.4. Army Leadership Requirements Model.

ment and promote a more positive Army culture. Now that we know *why* leaders do it, one now must understand *how* to do it. One tool that leaders can use to develop soldiers is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Lev Vygotsky was an influential Russian psychologist who studied sociocultural theory and learning. He developed the concept of scaffolding within something he called the ZPD and his research has informed generations of educators.

As Saul Mcleod, a PHD who specializes in the psychology of education, explains on the website *Simple Psychology*, Vygotsky's ZPD is related to a task that people are not able to perform without scaffolding from their leader.[16] Thus, ZPD explains how someone with greater amounts of knowledge can transfer that knowledge to a subordinate by helping them to accomplish tasks that they otherwise would not have been able to accomplish by themselves.

A Leader's Guide to Assessing and Developing a Soldier Using Zone of Proximal Development

Step 1: Assess the Soldier's Baseline Ability

- Evaluate the Soldier's ability to accomplish a specific mission-related task.
- Determine the Soldier's comfort level with applying the required skills.
- Identify what knowledge is essential for successful task completion.

Step 2: Analyze Required Support Systems

- Assess what external support systems (resources, equipment, personnel, etc.) are necessary for the Soldier to succeed.
- Identify potential points of failure where the task could break down.

Step 3: Introduce a Point of Friction

- Add a deliberate complication to the task to increase difficulty.
- This could be an operational constraint, time pressure, or an unexpected variable.
- Alternatively (or additionally), introduce stress factors that require the Soldier to demonstrate mental agility and adaptability.

Step 4: Ensure the Challenge Remains Within Reach

- Ensure the added difficulty takes the Soldier out of their comfort zone but keeps them within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).
- The ZPD is the range in which a Soldier cannot perform the task alone but can succeed with proper guidance and support from a leader.

Step 5: Provide Leader Support

- Offer necessary support and coaching as the Soldier engages with the challenging task.
- Adjust support as needed to promote learning, adaptation, and eventual independent performance.

Figure 5.5. Leader's Assessment Guide.

Vygotsky has demonstrated through research that when someone is within their ZPD, their ability to learn and adapt to new behaviors is greatly improved. Individuals learn faster and can handle more complex information.[17] The learner's capacity to process new pieces of information, and their ability to apply that information in a meaningful way toward the accomplishment of their tasks improves if there is an element of stress, complexity, and the mentorship of someone to walk them through the more difficult parts. One of the most effective ways a leader can mentor and develop their soldiers is through the scaffolded use of ZPD.

Developing soldiers through the ZPD is a deliberate, evolving process. It is rooted in the Army's commitment to adaptive, lifelong learning. The Army Learning Concept for 2015 envisions a force that is not only trained but educated; one where learning is adaptive, self-directed, and collaborative. At the core of this vision lies a principle as old as mentorship itself: scaffolding. Learners develop best when support is structured, timely, and tailored to the challenge in front of them. The concept of scaffolding aligns closely with the ZPD, the space where a soldier cannot yet succeed independently but can thrive with guided support. In practice, it means leaders must carefully assess each soldier's readiness and then provide the right level of guidance at the right moment. New knowledge and skills are introduced incrementally, *just in time,* to help soldiers overcome obstacles slightly beyond their current abilities. This fosters confidence, competence, and resilience.

According to FM 7-0*, Training*, creating a supportive learning environment is not optional, it's essential. Paragraph 2-12 highlights scaffolding as a key method for helping soldiers internalize complex tasks and adapt in dynamic conditions. Likewise, AR 350-1 emphasizes the importance of feedback, coaching, and mentoring, all critical components of scaffolding that help leaders grow their subordinates while reinforcing principles of adult learning. But scaffolding doesn't just support task completion; it builds thinking soldiers. ADP 3-0, *Operations* stresses the need for critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving in modern operations. That kind of intellectual agility is developed, not inherited, and it begins in training environments where leaders encourage risk-taking, thoughtful experimentation, and continuous reflection.

The Army Learning Model ties these ideas together. By promoting self-directed learning, collaboration, and adaptability, the ALM empowers soldiers to take ownership of their development while still benefiting from the structure and mentorship of seasoned leaders. Scaffolding within this model helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world

Step 1: Create a Sense of Urgency

- Identify potential threats or opportunities that require immediate action.
- Communicate why change is critical—use data, stories, or examples to build urgency.
- Motivate stakeholders to understand that maintaining the status quo is not an option.

Step 2: Build a Guiding Coalition

- Assemble a group of influential leaders, stakeholders, and change agents.
- Ensure the group has the credibility, authority, and expertise to lead the change.
- Foster trust and shared commitment within the coalition.

Step 3: Form a Strategic Vision and Initiatives

- Develop a clear, compelling vision for the future.
- Create strategic initiatives that align with the vision.
- Ensure the vision is simple, understandable, and inspirational.

Step 4: Enlist a Volunteer Army

- Communicate the vision and strategy broadly and clearly.
- Gain buy-in from a wide range of individuals across the organization.
- Encourage people to step forward and participate in driving the change.

Step 5: Enable Action by Removing Barriers

- Identify obstacles that hinder progress (e.g., outdated processes, resistance, resource gaps).
- Remove or reduce these barriers to empower people to act.
- Encourage risk-taking and creative problem-solving.

Step 6: Generate Short-Term Wins

- Plan for and achieve small, visible successes early in the process.
- Celebrate these wins to build momentum and reinforce commitment.
- Publicize achievements to validate the effort and inspire others.

Step 7: Sustain Acceleration

- Use early successes to drive more change.
- Keep up the momentum by continuously setting new goals and promoting innovation.
- Reinforce the change with new projects, themes, and champions.

Step 8: Institute Change

- Embed the changes into the culture and daily operations.
- Ensure leadership development and succession planning support the new way.
- Recognize and reward behaviors that reflect the new values and practices.

Figure 5.6. NCO's Guide to Implementing Change Using the Kotter Change Model.

application. Ultimately, the effective use of the ZPD and scaffolding is as much an art as it is a science. Leaders who practice it well evolve alongside their soldiers. They become more intuitive, adaptive, and capable of transforming not just individuals, but entire organizations. As soldiers grow in skill and confidence, units must be willing to evolve their systems and cultures in kind. Because when we commit to developing people, we set the foundation for adaptive, ready, and future-focused Army teams.

Empowering Change in Organizations

Sometimes units need to change to get better. Sometimes the ones who can see the need for change are in leadership positions and sometimes they are not. While it is easier to institute change when one is in an official leadership position, one does not need a title to influence change. When thinking about organizational change, Senior NCOs can make use of the Kotter's 8-Step Change Model as it is a proven change management process.[18] Dr. John Kotter was an influential Harvard Business School professor who published one of the most widely read books on organizational change, *Leading Change*. Kotter's research was so widely accepted that the Army teaches his change model within its professional education system.

Before applying this method, leaders must know that there are two prominent challenges with applying it. First, it is a time commitment. It cannot be rushed. Instead, it can take years to accomplish the desired results and meet the intended vision of the leader. The second issue is that several of the steps, while being possible to accomplish at lower echelons, often require true legitimate authority to enact. In the fifth step of the Kotter Method, removing obstacles, it could require the removal of negative individuals from positions. Doing so requires a legitimate level of authority which will allow NCOs to remove or replace people on a team. The same is true in step two when building a coalition. Success of that step requires the leader to have authority to place the right people and the right positions within the organization to help enable real change. This doesn't mean that people that understand the needs of an organization are powerless without legitimate authority. NCOs are asked to learn how to extend influence beyond their organization. This sacred art of learning how to influence is crucial in their ability to enact positive change. They must be able to effectively communicate the need for change, motivate and energize others in acting and implementing change, and have the wherewithal to devise the change into an actionable plan instead of just providing another bright idea from the fabled good idea fairy.

The most important part of enabling positive change within an organization is ownership. NCOs *must* own their mission and position to enable positive changes at an organizational level. All too often, we see leaders who are quick to require hard work from others but refuse to commit their time and effort to the cause. These disconnected leaders will never figure out why their soldiers don't follow them wholeheartedly. We read about leaders like Leonidas of the Spartans and how he personally led at Thermopylae.[19] We see dramatic images of historic figures leading from the front like George Washington crossing the Delaware, or Mel Gibson's portrayal of Lt. Col. Hal Moore being the first soldier on ground during the battle of Ia Drang in the 2002 film "We Were Soldiers."[20] The stories of those that lead from the front create a standard for what soldiers want to see in their leadership, and it starts with ownership and commitment. Once a leader can demonstrate that they care for both their subordinates and the mission, great things can occur.

On the other hand, it is not always the charismatic out-front leader who gets the best results. Sometimes positive changes and improving an organization means taking a step back. We all want to be the charismatic leader who is in front of our soldiers doing the right thing, but sometimes being too hands-on impedes positive performance instead of aiding in it.

> *I (Richard) learned this lesson early on in my career during my first deployment to Iraq.*
>
> *I was filling in as a squad leader and was anxious to show my squad and my platoon sergeant that I was up for the task. I was meticulous in my attention to detail and tried to constantly take care of my squad by being hands-on whenever possible. Shortly after vehicles started being hit with improvised explosive devices (IED) the army began fielding protection kits consisting of large parts of steel that needed to be bolted onto existing Humvees. My squad was tasked with fitting two of our existing vehicles with these new kits. The plates were extremely heavy, and the job was physically demanding and tough.*
>
> *I decided the best way to motivate the squad was to ensure that I was included in every aspect of refitting the vehicles. Early in the assembly, I was under one of the vehicles with one of my soldiers trying to hold a rather large steel plate into place while he socketed a bolt that would secure it to the bottom of the Humvee frame. It was the middle of summer in Iraq, and we were roasting. I tried to remain calm and cheer-*

ful throughout the ordeal so that the private would not have his moral diminished.

After about 45 minutes of trying to line up the bolts, hold the large still panel in place, and then fit the steel onto the Humvee, I scrambled out from under the vehicle, sure that I would find the rest of the squad hard at work with the other panels on the other truck. Instead, I saw the remaining seven soldiers of my squad leaning against a wall. Three were smoking cigarettes and the rest were just talking like there was nothing to worry about. The steel panels were still in a perfect pile on the ground, untouched by any soldier within my squad. The only people who had completed any of the work were myself and the private who was unfortunate enough to have to help me.

I was awestruck at the absolute laziness my soldiers were demonstrating; the private who assisted me with the panel was furious, and in truth, so was I. Although I felt justified in my actions, I am now ashamed to say that at that moment, I let my anger take over. I smacked a cigarette out of one of my soldiers' hands and commenced screaming at them. I couldn't believe that they hadn't started anything. When they offered the weak excuse that I didn't tell them to do anything, and that I hadn't given any instructions on how to attach the panels, I decided to take a different approach. No one had told me inherently how to put the kits together. I had figured it out on my own because I understood the importance of ensuring the safety of my soldiers. Therefore, since I was the one who applied common sense to how to make it happen, I decided that what they really needed at that point in time was not just one more person working on the task, but a very strict supervisor.

I didn't lift a wrench for the next four hours. Instead, I meticulously supervised and ensured that each member of my squad, aside from the private who assisted me under the vehicle, stayed extremely busy laboring under the vehicles. In layman's terms, I micromanaged them down to the second. I gave them breaks when necessary, and ensured they stayed properly hydrated. However, there were no snacks, cigarettes, or banter for the first part of the ordeal. After one truck was complete, I gathered the squad and explained to them the importance of what we were doing. I pointed out that the steel panels that we were putting on were not for some other un-

known soldier, but for us and our survivability. I reminded them of a few IEDs that had gone off within the brigade footprint and the destruction that they had caused. Afterwards, I was able to calm down a little bit and allowed my squad to work at a more reasonable and sustainable pace. However, for the remainder of the installation, I kept a watchful eye on everyone in my squad to avoid the possibility of one of them becoming lazy while the others worked hard. In doing this, I was providing leadership to my squad by giving them my undivided attention, or more simply put, giving them my time.

Time is Empowerment

Leadership is time, and time is empowerment. One of the most significant things a leader can do for their soldier is to give them their time. This goes further than sitting down and talking to them. Invest time in their training, education, fitness, and personal development. When leaders do this, they build relationships with their soldiers that improve trust in both directions. The leaders begin to trust the soldiers more because they understand their capabilities, and the soldiers trust their leaders more because they understand that they care.

I (Robert) experienced this as a young soldier. I was a PFC stationed at Fort Polk and was going for my Expert Field Medical Badge. I had made it through all the lanes and only had the 12-mile road march to complete. In my mind I felt like the badge was already mine. I was 19 years old and consistently had the highest PT score in my platoon. I knew it would not be a problem. However, despite being good at PT, I hadn't ruck marched since basic training and didn't understand the differences in the physical requirements between the PT test and a timed road march. My unit did not expect me to make it to the final event and did not invest time in preparing me for the road march. I didn't invest time because I didn't think it was necessary. I was wrong.

The road march started at 04:00 the next morning, which was a Saturday, and I was ready to go. As we began, I knew that I needed to complete each mile in 15 minutes or less, which I figured would be easy for someone who was still running sub-five-minute miles. I ran almost all the first mile and was nearly exhausted when I hit the one-mile marker. As I passed the marker I looked down at my watch and it said 12:00. At

that point I realized that I was not going to make it. I needed to walk soon, and there was no way I was going to finish the next 11 miles within the time constraints. I felt dejected as I realized the event was much harder than I had anticipated. But I kept going.

Not much later I began to walk, then run, then walk again. I passed the four-mile marker in just under an hour. Now I knew I was not going to make it. As I was contemplating just how much further I could go, one of the NCOs from my unit caught up to me. This NCO was not competing for the badge and had just shown up to provide motivation to the competitors. He was not wearing any gear, so I imagine it was not hard for him to catch me. This NCO's name was Corporal O'Neal, and he was not well respected by me or the other soldiers. I had never really spent much time with him, but overall, I thought he was lazy and incompetent in his duties as an NCO. I found it interesting that Corporal O'Neal would give up a Saturday to come cheer on a soldier who he didn't really know or probably like.

Corporal O'Neal's arrival picked up my spirits and he gave me a banana that he had obtained from one of the water points that I had ignored. As I ate it, I could literally feel my energy coming back. Once I was done, Corporal O'Neal encouraged me to run a little then walk a little in a disciplined fashion. Don't run until you are tired, just run to the next tree, sign, or terrain feature. I followed his advice, and I started to pass other candidates. I was tired, but I felt energized. I passed the eight-mile marker at one hour and 38 minutes. It took me almost an hour to do the first four miles by myself, and now with the instruction of an NCO that I did not like, I had completed the next four-mile segment in 38 minutes. I was caught up. My motivation increased and I kept going. At two hours and some odd minutes I crossed the finish line in third place overall and had my badge pinned on my chest two hours later.

My relationship with Corporal O'Neal changed. He was no longer a lazy and incompetent NCO, but someone who cared, and when given the chance would do all that he could do to help a fellow soldier. To this day I feel bad for having misjudged him and am thankful that he turned a blind eye and didn't judge me. He gave me his time, and empowered me not

only to earn a badge, but to become a much better and less judgmental soldier.

Giving Time to Accomplish the Mission

Another aspect of time relates to giving soldiers time to accomplish their mission. During my (Robert's) time as a platoon sergeant, one of the things we consistently did was Sergeant's Time Training. At Fort Lewis, on Thursdays all NCOs were given time on the training schedule to train their soldiers in whatever individual METL task that they might have been deficient in. For our company, this was a priority, along with everything else that a BSB did. In a BSB, much of your time is spent supporting the brigade, and not much is left over to prepare for training. That said, we always found a little time to make things work. As I look back on this period of my life, I am still not sure how my sergeants did it. NCOs in my platoon literally had about one-and one-half hours a week to attempt to go through all steps within the eight-step training model, and it usually occurred around 15:00 on Wednesday afternoon. Sometimes we had more time, but most of the time we didn't, and because of this, Sergeant's Time Training was haphazard at best, and I held my NCOs accountable for the quality of the training they provided.

In hindsight, as the platoon sergeant, I could have done a better job of coordinating the time for my squad leaders to prepare for their training. Instead of working to give them more time, I had demanded they give their personal time to make up for what I did not give them. Thus, the 15:00-16:30 day before prep-time often ended up lasting until 20:00. I know this because I was there with them, but to this day, I have no idea why I was okay with it. If a leader is going to expect a subordinate to plan and execute high quality training, it is the leader's responsibility to resource them to do it, and the resources must include time. It is okay to have planning time as white space on a training calendar. I wish I had realized this when I was younger. White space is scary to brief, but it is vital to properly resource people to accomplish the mission. If you want to empower soldiers to succeed, give them the time they need to perform the task well. Don't fear the white space.

Monkey Business

Empowering soldiers to act involves the concept of disciplined initiative. ADP 6-0 describes disciplined initiative as a soldier's duty to act within the constraints of the commander's intent to achieve the desired outcome.[21] The key word in the concept of disciplined initiative is discipline. It does not mean taking undisciplined action, or any sort of initiative, but rather actions that align with the commander's intent. While there are many things that NCOs can do to encourage initiative, it requires

a leader who creates a command climate that allows for honest mistakes. When soldiers realize that they will be supported by their command if they make a mistake applying disciplined initiative, they will be more likely to take it when it's crucial to mission success. This is important because in most cases, NCO and soldiers will be the ones on the front lines with the most accurate information and must be empowered to make decisions.

If your soldiers are always asking you what to do, it is most likely that they know what to do but are afraid to take initiative for fear of repercussions.

> *When I (Robert) was a sergeant first class assigned to Tripler Army Medical Center, I was once volunteered to be the OIC of a qualification range. The planning for the range went well, and I expected that the execution would also go well. However, on the morning of the range, the bus driver did not arrive as directed. All the soldiers were gathered in formation and waiting. When I contacted the bus driver, I found that he had overslept, and it would be almost an hour before he arrived. No other soldier had a bus-driver's license, and I could not afford to start the range late. In hospitals, many soldiers must go back to work following ranges because they have patients scheduled. This is especially true for physicians. So, I decided and had the soldiers carpool to the range.*
>
> *Luckily, our weapons were already at the range, and the ranges at Schofield Barracks were easily accessible by personally owned vehicles. Eventually we all made it to the range, and everything went well until the master sergeant who oversaw the S3 found out that I deviated from the approved transportation plan. I had been a sergeant first class for about three years and hadn't been yelled at for some time. My streak ended, as I was the recipient of a high-quality dressing down. Once the range ended, I reported to the S3 Operations Officer, stood at parade rest, and explained myself. The master sergeant was more amicable when I was standing in front of him and ultimately commended me for getting the mission done. The outcome of this event, however, was that I never volunteered to run another range for Tripler. I hadn't quite become the alienated follower that we described in the previous chapter, but I came closer to being one than I care to admit. The moral of this story is that belittling people for taking initiative will not empower them to take it, or like in my case, it may cause them to avoid situations where initiative will be required all together.*

Multiplying Empowerment

NCOs are leadership multipliers. In *Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter*, Liz Wiseman and Greg McKeown reveal a powerful insight: leaders who underutilize their people unintentionally create environments where employees feel diminished, underused, and disengaged. In contrast, "Multiplier" leaders amplify the intelligence, capability, and initiative of those around them. They stretch others to reach beyond perceived limits, enabling growth and innovation.

For Army NCOs, this matters. NCOs train, mentor, and lead soldiers daily. If NCOs fail to challenge and support their soldiers appropriately, they risk creating teams that are technically present but mentally disengaged. Soldiers who feel underutilized may lack initiative, commitment, or a sense of ownership in their missions. Wiseman and McKeown's findings support key Army leadership principles: develop subordinates, empower decision-making, and create conditions for initiative.

Wiseman and McKeown also found that in organizations that did not utilize people to their fullest potential resulted in employees feeling underutilized and overworked at the same time. In these organizations most leaders believe they have untapped creativity and resources within their current workforce, while at the same time the employees reported they were only giving around 50 percent of their capability.[22] Leaders who choose to make their employees smarter will shine the spotlight on their subordinates when things go right and remove it when things go wrong. They will encourage strong debate when decisions are important, and they will engage in active listening and ask relevant questions, as compared to making all the decisions themselves and shutting down debates.[23] Read more about the topic of developing others and coaching in ADP 6-22.[24] It is a leader's responsibility to empower their soldiers to learn and grow, and avoiding the desire to be the smartest person in the room is one of the key principles one must uphold to embody this concept.

These concepts become more important as a soldier moves up in rank. By the time I (Robert) was a first sergeant, I no longer knew how to do the jobs of all my subordinates. I oversaw a medical company which contained over 30 different military occupational specialties. There is no way I could know more than my soldiers about their jobs. That said, I did know more about empowering soldiers through decision making processes that involved those charged with executing the task describing to me the best way to do it with enough information to equip me. The key to this was that I never "pulled rank," said "you should know this," or "that's not how

we do it in the Army." I let my soldiers and NCOs suggest anything they wanted. I encouraged crazy ideas, even if we seldom executed them. I was also fortunate enough to have a commander that empowered me to do this. I was not set on being the smartest person in the room. To be honest, when everyone was critically thinking about their respective tasks, they were much smarter than me. When you empower others to be smart, they work harder to not let you down, and because of this, my unit was able to execute missions in unique and creative ways.

Inner Work Life Theory: Empowering and Motivating

Empowerment and motivation have similar meanings, but there are some nuanced differences. Motivating conjures thoughts of carrots and sticks, whereas empowerment creates images of agency and self-determining action. When individuals feel they are moving forward, even in small steps, they become more engaged, creative, resilient, and committed to their work. As the frontline leaders responsible for the training, development, and well-being of soldiers, NCOs must understand that performance isn't driven by discipline alone, it's also driven by motivation and mindset.[25]

NCOs can empower their soldiers to commit to their work by connecting their day-to-day tasks with something important that the organization is doing. Leaders can do this by focusing on small wins, breakthroughs, forward movement, and goal completion. They can provide catalysts through setting clear goals, allowing autonomy, providing sufficient time, helping with the work, learning from the problems, and allowing for new ideas. Leaders can nourish their workers by providing respect, encouragement, and emotional support.[26]

Empowering people simply requires the leader to help frame the work for the soldier in ways that are meaningful and make sense.

> *When I (Robert) was a private, I was stationed at Camp Pelham, Korea with the 2nd Engineer Battalion. I arrived in January and found myself in the field at a training site near the DMZ a week later. I recall one night at about 02:00, while I was on guard duty, my first sergeant stopped by to check on me. I was in the prone and wearing every level of cold weather gear that the Army issued me. I imagine I looked like a camouflaged marshmallow. Being new to the unit, and new to Korea, I was tired, hungry, and freezing, and didn't mind telling my first sergeant just how miserable I was. To this day I remember what he said, "I know you are cold, I know you are tired, but the people of the United States need you to be right here, right now.*



Figure. 5.7. How to Empower Soldiers. Dale Cordes, untitled, 2026, graphite on paper, Lawrence, Kansas.

You are one of the ones who stepped forward and volunteered to keep the rest of the country free. You can do it, they can't." After hearing that, I was still cold, but his words made sense, and I became much less miserable. I felt that I was empowered to keep pulling my weight in the company. After all, we weren't training, we were keeping the world safe for democracy.

Empower Soldiers to Grow

Soldiers need to get out of their comfort zones to develop more diverse skills, knowledge, and behaviors than they would if they only ever performed duties within their MOS. While there are certainly a few broadening assignments available, sometimes NCOs can help to develop their

soldiers within their unit. If you are in a leadership position, from corporal to command sergeant major and are tasked to provide a person to fill a job outside of the duties associated with their MOS (think rear detachment, operations, training room, etc.), if it does not hurt, you are providing the wrong person. Always give your most valuable, not your most available. This gives a valuable soldier an opportunity to expand their repertoire of skills, and it demonstrates to the tasking organization/leader that you are a team player. In addition, it gives you an opportunity to develop a second-string soldier to fill the slot you just vacated. It's a win-win-win.

> *When I (Robert) was a platoon sergeant in the 296th BSB at Fort Lewis, I had several opportunities to do just this, and it was never an easy task or decision. However, whomever I chose always ended up being a great soldier and made the organization better wherever she or he went. One such example was when I was asked to provide a soldier to work in the company training room. Instead of giving them my most available soldier, I gave my most organized and one of most valuable soldiers, one who I knew would make sure the company, and by proxy my platoon, was always squared away. Twenty-four years later this same soldier would return the favor and offer me the chance to write a book. Empowering soldiers to grow is always a good investment.*

Questions for Discussion

- **Trust Before Proof or Proof Before Trust?**

  The chapter argues that leaders should "trust until proven otherwise." What are the risks and benefits of this mindset in your current leadership environment?

- **Risk Acceptance and Organizational Climate**

  How does a leader's willingness or unwillingness to accept risk shape the initiative level of subordinates? Where have you seen risk avoidance create paralysis?

- **Empowered to Fail**

  The combatives competition story highlights learning through failure. How can leaders create conditions where mistakes become learning opportunities without compromising standards?

- **Mission Command in Garrison**

  Why do leaders sometimes trust soldiers in combat but micromanage them in garrison? What does this say about culture and perceived risk?

- **The Power of Language**

  How does organizational rhetoric, such as "sick-call ranger" or "profile rider," influence behavior in subtle ways? What language in your unit might unintentionally discourage healthy behaviors?

- **Start With Why**

  How does clearly communicating the "why" behind a task improve disciplined initiative? Share an example where understanding the purpose changed your level of commitment or creativity.

- **Positional Power and Communication**

  How does rank or authority distort communication within organizations? What practical steps can leaders take to ensure their intent is clearly understood?

- **Challenging the Status Quo**

  The chapter reexamines *A Message to Garcia*. When should soldiers execute without question, and when should they seek clarification? How do you teach that balance?

- **Time as Empowerment**

  The authors argue that leadership is time. In what ways does giving time, whether for training preparation or personal development, directly empower subordinates?

- **Multiplying Leadership**

  What distinguishes a "Multiplier" leader from a leader who unintentionally diminishes initiative? How can NCOs intentionally become leadership multipliers within their formations?

Recommended Further Reading

"Psychological Safety Builds Stronger Teams," by Ret. Sgt. Christopher Rodriguez, *The NCO Journal*, September 2025.

"Army Doctrine and the NCO: Mission Command and Small-Unit Leadership," by Sgt. Maj. Christopher Prosser, *The NCO Journal*, February 2020.

"Navigating Resistance to Transformation," by Sgt. Maj Raymond L. Lopez, *The NCO Journal*, November 2025.

"Eliminating Micromanagement and Embracing Mission Command," by Maj. Justin T. DeLeon and Dr. Paolo G. Tripodi, *Military Review*, September-October 2022.

Endnotes

1. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command: The Command and Control of Army Forces* (Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate, July 2019), Para 1-14.

2. ADP 6-0, Para 1-26 to Para 1-44.

3. Jack Maden, "The Golden Mean: Aristotle's Guide to Living Excellently," *Philosophy Break*, Jan 2012, https://philosophybreak.com/articles/the-golden-mean-aristotle-guide-to-living-excellently/.

4. Christopher Mascia, "Leading Generation Z: Abandoning the Zero Defect Mentality." *NCO Journal*, 2020, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2020/May/Leading-Generation-Z/.

5. ADRP 6-0, Para 7.

6. ADP 6-0, Para 1-25.

7. Richard Nordquist, "Illocutionary Force in Speech Theory," *ThoughtCo*, 27 Aug. 2020, https://www.thoughtco.com/illocutionary-force-speech-1691147.

8. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate, July 2019), Para 1-102 to 5-71.

9. Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (Penguin, 2009).

10. ADP 6-0, Para 1-36 to para 1-34.

11. ADP 6-0, Para 1-59.

12. Elbert Hubbard, *A Message to Garcia* (The Roycrofters, 1899).

13. ADP 6-0, Para 1-59.

14. ADP 6-0, Para 1-31.

15. ADP 6-22, Para 1-82 to 1-85.

16. Saul Mcleod, "Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding Theory." *SimplyPsychology.org,* October 11, 2023, https://www.simplypsychology.org/zone-of-proximal-development.html.

17. Alex Kozulin, *Vegotski's Educational Theory in Cultural Contexts* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

18. Michael Bold, Change Happens Because People Find That it Works to Their Benefit. (US Army 2019) https://www.army.mil/article/217441/change_happens_because_people_find_that_it_works_to_their_benefit

19. Herodotus, *The Histories* (Penguin Classics. 2023).

20. David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (Oxford University Press. 2004); We Were Soldiers. Randall Wallace. Paramount Pictures. 2002.

21. ADP 6-0, Para 1-59.

22. Liz Wiseman and Greg McKeown, *Multipliers* (Harper Business, 2010), Chapter 1.

23. Wiseman and McKeown *Multipliers*.

24. ADP 6-22, Para 4-3, Para 6-54 to 6-55.

25. Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, *The Progress Principle* (Harvard University Press. 2011).

26. Amy, M. Cartoon, “I’m Not Mopping the Floors; I’m Putting a Man on the Moon: How NASA Leaders Enhanced the Meaningfulness of Work by Changing the Meaning of Work,” *Sage Journals*, 63(2), 2017, doi.org/10.1177/0001839217713748; Amabile and Kramer, *The Progress Principle*.

Chapter 6

Owning Failures and Solving Problems

One of the best combat commanders during World War II, General Omar Bradly, once mentioned that the American soldier expects skilled leaders who can complete the mission without needless loss. Sergeants should be the most capable in the platoon, able to teach others their duties. General Bradley reminds us that "Noncommissioned officers are supposed to be the best soldiers on the battlefield."[1] Being the best soldier on the battlefield, however, is an intimidating task. It leaves little room for failure. Few people learn from a process of "trial and perfect," Usually it is trial and error. The key difference is that one should fail in training rather than in combat, and that failure cannot be illegal, unethical, or immoral. In this chapter we will examine the concept of failure and share some of our own. Failures, when reflected on and learned from, form the foundation of success. Successful people make mistakes and misjudge situations; but it does not define them. They are successful because of the ability to reflect internally and grow from lessons learned in failure.

Learning from Mistakes

I, (Robert) found many unhelpful approaches to how I led soldiers over the course of my career. Leadership is fluid and will work differently from one situation to another. An approach that may be highly effective in a TDA unit may fail miserably in an MTOE unit. It is up to the leader to decide what approach to take, and to adjust based on the operating environment that will produce the best results. Here is a story about a time when I failed to do just that.

> *If you read the third chapter, you may recall that I made a resolution to quit yelling at soldiers when I was a staff sergeant after a soldier told me that I was the reason she had decided to ETS from the Army. For the most part, I kept my promise to myself apart from article 15 proceedings. I was never angry at the soldier who was getting the article 15, in fact I felt very bad for them, but I saw it as my duty to make sure they understood the gravity of the situation in hopes that they would learn from their mistake and not want to face me and my commander for an article 15 again. I also believed that my commanders wanted me to ensure the article 15 was a memorable experience for the soldier. Thus, despite the sympathy I felt for my soldiers, I would deliberately act like a big jerk*

during the article 15. I did this as a first sergeant, and as a command sergeant major. I had a lesson coming my way that would finally fix my attitude.

When I was a command sergeant major, my commander and I withheld all misconduct that involved alcohol at our level. This means that we did not allow company commanders to conduct article 15s for alcohol related offenses. This was my commander's prerogative, and on his authority that we did this, but I supported the decision. Alcohol related misconduct is a cancer within the Army, and we wanted to ensure that it was immediately removed with prejudice when we encountered it.

One evening, while watching TV with my wife, I received a call from one of my first sergeants that two of my soldiers were arrested in housing for public intoxication. I was disappointed to learn that one of them was one of the best soldiers in the unit. The second soldier was on his second offense, and I was not too surprised. Disappointed, but not surprised. The "good soldier" was a 21-year-old specialist and he had supplied the alcohol to the "other soldier" who was a 20-year-old private first class. I informed my first sergeant that the commander and I would handle the following UCMJ. The next day, my commander conducted the first reading, submitted the request for a field grade article 15 to our Judge Advocate General's (JAG) office, and flagged the soldiers. We had the paperwork back within a week (we had a great JAG) and scheduled the second reading.

When an article 15 is conducted, it is important that the commander is neutral during the judgment phase and allow soldiers to present evidence or explain mitigating circumstances before she or he decides of guilt or innocence. In this case, we had blood alcohol level reports that the MPs had obtained on the night of the incident, and pending any new development, we kind of knew how the article 15 would play out. We had considered maxing both soldiers out with a punishment of 45 days extra duty and the reduction of one rank, with a suspension of the reduction for the specialist and an implementation for the private first class as it was his second offense. Having this in mind, I informed the private first class to make sure he

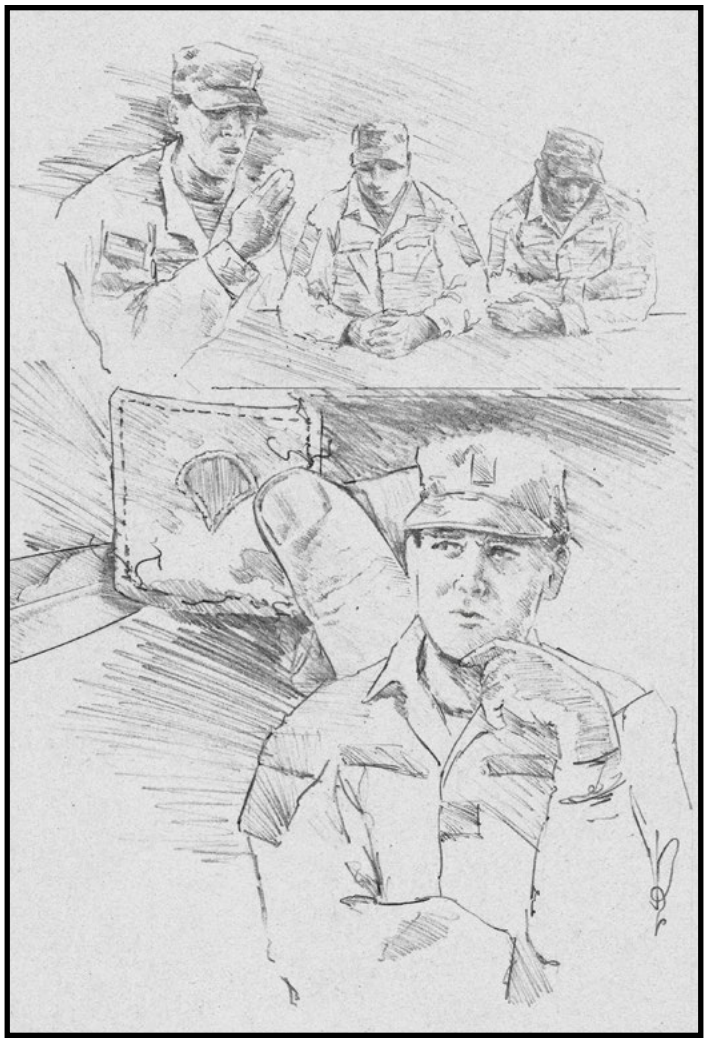


Figure. 6.1. How to Own failures and Solve Problems. Dale Cordes, untitled, 2026, graphite on paper, Lawrence, Kansas.

had Velcro rank on his uniform for the second reading if he was reduced. I did not say anything to the specialist.

When we conducted the second reading of the article 15, the soldier's company commander made a strong argument that an alcohol related incident, even one, should be punished at an equal level, and we needed to show the rest of the command that this kind of behavior had repercussions, and there is no second chance. My commander agreed and made the decision to reduce both soldiers one grade in addition to giving them

45 days of extra duty. We brought the private first class back first. After he reported, the commander issued his judgment and informed the private first class of his punishment. When it was my turn to speak, I cursed the soldier out, told him I was disappointed in him, pulled his rank off and threw it in the trash can, all while yelling as loud as I could.

We brought in the specialist next. After the commander issued his judgment and informed the soldier of his punishment, I followed the same script as I had with the private first class. However, when I went to remove his rank, I realized it was sewn on. Not to be dissuaded, I grabbed the Gerber off my commander's desk and ripped the rank off the soldier's chest and threw it in the trash. I then grabbed the private first-class rank from the trash and attached it to the soldier with a staple. To be clear, I stapled it to the soldier's uniform not to the soldier. Next, I pointed out that the ex-specialist was responsible for the situation because he had bought the alcohol, and that every time he looked at his rank, he needed to remember that he was wearing the rank of his friend. To me, this was poetic justice, and I thought my words would stick with the soldier for a long time. What I didn't notice was the look of horror on the faces of the company command team. After all, I was constantly preaching dignity and respect, and they just saw me act like I was the biggest hypocrite in the world. But, like I said, justice had been served.

About a month later, I was at home one evening and I received a phone call from my brigade command sergeant major. He asked me if I had put my hands on a soldier during an article 15 and stapled rank from the trash can to his chest. I honestly had to think for a second because the incident was already water under the bridge. I denied putting my hands on the soldier, but I owned up to stapling the rank on from the trash can. After which, I got 30 minutes of my own medicine and the brigade command sergeant major informed me that my commander and I would be suspended for an investigation, and our unit would be assessed for a toxic command climate. By the time I hung up the phone, I was partially convinced that I had just ended my career. While I did not think I was wrong in my actions, I could see the brigade command sergeant ma-

jor's point of view, and I knew the Army becomes less tolerant of mistakes as one moves up in rank.

The next Monday, a team of field grade officers and NCOs arrived at my unit and began conducting interviews and sensing sessions with our soldiers. My commander and I were pretty sure that this was going to end poorly, as surely the soldiers who received the article 15 would report on how toxic our leadership was. I felt responsible for the entire incident and was distraught at the thought of my commander being punished for my actions. I felt even worse that someone had seen my actions as toxic and felt the need to report me to the brigade command team without even talking to me. Afterall, I consistently worked at being approachable to anyone within the command.

At the end of the week, the investigation was complete, and it was the soldiers in my unit who saved me and my commander. We found out that in the sensing sessions none of the soldiers, NCOs, or officers, could believe we were being investigated for toxicity and reported leadership that was caring, empowering, and the exact opposite of a toxic command. Minus the people who filed the complaint, our soldiers believed we were good leaders, and they did not want us replaced. Just prior to receiving the results from the investigation, I knew we would be okay as the colonel who led the investigation walked into my office with his rank coming loose from his chest and asked to borrow my stapler.

After this experience, I still believed that my actions were noble, but henceforth, I removed all theatrics from article 15 proceedings. It took me about two more years before I could see that I was wrong and had been wrong for a long time. I was wrong because I made soldiers feel worse when they were already at the bottom. When people are in trouble, they need dignity and respect, not to be made to feel worse. The official punishment is enough to get the appropriate message across. I was also wrong because I was demonstrating poor leadership behaviors in front of command teams, whom I preached to about not losing one's cool. They didn't know it was an act, and they didn't feel they could talk to me because of my hypocrisy and quite frankly, terrifying behavior. I owe a lot of people an apology, and you dear reader, if you get nothing else

out of this entire book, learn from my mistakes. Soldiers need you to make things better, not worse. When someone makes a poor decision, they know how serious the consequences of their actions are, and they need you to provide dignity and respect throughout the process. This sentiment applies to all soldiers, regardless of the infraction they commit. Ultimately, I recovered from the mistake in this story and was able to change my behavior in a way that aligns with my values and beliefs. Hopefully you do not have to go through something like remember that "all soldiers are entitled to outstanding leadership."[2]

In a similar experience, I (Richard) have had the opportunity to learn from failure as a teacher many times in the Army. One of the most impactful lessons I have ever learned came from my time in Ranger School. I had gone to Ranger School from the Old Guard in Washington D.C. From day one, it was clear that my experience in the Old Guard had not prepared me as much as the units from which the other students came. We had young officers straight out of West Point, soldiers from Ranger Regiment, Special Forces, and battle-hardened Airborne from the 82nd just to name a few. I deemed myself behind the power curve in many areas. I tried to make up for my lack of experience and knowledge by working hard and paying attention to every class given in the garrison part of each training battalion, prior to the field exercises. My fear and insecurities, however, ended up getting the best of me.

During my first leadership position during the field exercise in 5th Ranger Training Battalion, I was tasked as squad leader for 24 hours. During the movement and actions on the objective, I did fine. I constantly communicated information up and down and maneuvered my squad to help the company accomplish their mission. During the nightly patrol base activities, however, I fell apart. My squad members were cold, exhausted, and hungry. Few of them felt like executing their priorities of work that were required before we could rest. As a squad leader, it was my responsibility to ensure every member of the squad did their part to ensure we accomplished all necessary tasks prior to eating or sleeping. My squad was suffering from exhaustion, and they began falling asleep in the prone position instead of pulling security. I probably chose the worst

way possible to motivate my tired squad. Constantly I would badger them with how their lack of effort was going to result in me getting a failing mark for my leadership position. Embarrassingly, at one point I found myself saying, "come on guys, you're going to get me a no-go!" In truth, I probably said this a bunch of times. It turned out no one cared if I passed or not. My squad's physical and psychological needs were not met, and I was more concerned about a no-go.

Food, water, warmth, and rest were much more important to my squad than the desire they may have to help me achieve a passing score on my leadership role for the patrol. I failed to see this, and I lost their trust and willingness to follow me. No one was willing to listen to my pleas for a passing grade, and the squad decided to go ahead and eat and sleep as they felt they needed to. In the end, I was fired from the leadership position and was at risk of being kicked out of Ranger School. I felt as though I was the biggest failure in the Army.

By the grace of the Ranger School command team, I was given a second chance and allowed to recycle back into 5th Ranger Training Battalion into the second phase of Ranger school. This time I watched how the more successful leaders acted, and I reflected on my selfish attitude and narcissistic fear of failure. After some time, I eventually felt that I was ready to try to be a leader again. When I was given the leadership task of a Platoon Sergeant, with the requirement to lead soldiers into a patrol base and execute all priorities of work for the night, I was prepared. I told my squad that if they followed my guidance, I would have them eating and sleeping as fast as possible. I spent the next 12 hours focused solely on the needs of my platoon and ensured that everyone was taken care of. When we eventually got ahead of schedule, I went to each squad leader and took over their duties for an hour so they could get some much-needed rest. At the end of the 12-hour leadership trial, I was physically exhausted but full of spirit. I had put my grade out of my mind and just focused on my soldiers.

The result of my actions was rare and my entire platoon received a much-appreciated set of compliments from our lead Ranger Walker. It didn't matter that he didn't mention me or my efforts. What mattered is that I had accomplished my re-

quired tasks and had taken care of my soldiers in the most challenging environment I had ever experienced. I went on to earn my Ranger Tab and I never forgot the importance of placing my soldiers' needs before my own. This was a hard lesson to learn, and failing is never fun, but I am a far better leader for having experienced it. Failure is only final when you quit.

Inspiring Others

When attempting to inspire others, be them your seniors, peers, or subordinates, consistently touting your accomplishments is not always the best approach. In fact, reminding those around you of all the great things you have done is often perceived as narcissistic and can discourage people from wanting to be around you. This is often the weakness of the pacesetting approach to leadership.

Pacesetting is when a leader has high expectations for themselves and expects the same commitment from their subordinates. In pacesetting, the leader leads by example, but that example is often unattainable by others. Pacesetters are generally workaholics, have high standards, are impatient, and cannot see why others may struggle reaching their levels of productivity. Pacesetters want it done now, and to perfection. The problem with pacesetting is that the accomplishments of pacesetters can come across as boastful and can lead to burnout or feelings of inadequacy in subordinates.[3]

If you are a pacesetter, it's okay. Understand that people work differently, though, and don't brag about what you have done. Instead, work to set a positive example in all that you do. Be humble and let your actions speak for you. Share stories about mistakes you have made. They will be more likely to be open about the mistakes they have made as well. You can inspire people by sharing your mistakes and recanting how you overcame them. Keep in mind that this approach takes high levels of self-awareness, confidence, and humility.

While instructing at the Sergeants Major Academy I (Robert) have often told the story of me stapling the rank to my soldier's chest to my students. I am not proud of the story or my mindset at the time when it took place. However, I do find it to be a great opportunity to teach future sergeants major that it is okay to make a mistake and to talk about mistakes openly. In doing this, my students never lost faith in me as a senior NCO or as an instructor, but rather it built their confidence in me because they felt I was doing everything I could to help them be successful. Hiding

your mistakes will generate feelings of mistrust and loathing. This creates alienated followers if your subordinates find out you're making mistakes that they are chastised for. It is always best to be open and honest when mistakes are made.

Owning mistakes and failures

Sometimes, a leader can inspire others simply by owning their mistakes. I (Rich) was responsible for the misallocation of my battalion's time and efforts to meet mission accomplishment while serving as a Command Sergeant major for a recruiting battalion. When I was first introduced to the battalion, they were hurting to find eligible recruits for enlistment into the Army. The world was just coming out of its COVID quarantine, and both recruiters and the potential recruits were still used to isolation and not engaging in public meetings. The battalion had to find a way to reach potential recruits and deliver the Army message. Out of seven companies, only one was doing well. Their 1SG was a charismatic and analytically detailed individual who created a marketing strategy to empower his recruiters to find and meet people. He used statistical data to determine how to put the right recruiter in the right place and at the right time. The recruiter was also prepared with the right message, giving them the best opportunity to make an appointment with a potential recruit. His operation took a firm understanding of market intelligence, time management, and how to re-educate recruiters to give quick elevator pitches on the Army to multiple individuals in a short amount of time. My commander and I were impressed. With this 1SG's assistance, we immediately tried to upscale the effort to a battalion level operation. I spent weeks on the road sharing the plan with company command teams and recruiting stations, and I could not understand why the plan was being met with reluctance. While I was delivering the message down, my commander was delivering the message up. He briefed the plan, affectionately titled: Operation Fury Road, with not only the brigade command, but with the two-star general in charge of United States Army Recruiting Command (USAREC). We were sure that this would be an epic triumph and solidify the battalion as one of the best in USAREC. We were wrong.

The plan did not upscale in the way we had hoped for multiple reasons that we should have addressed before moving into execution. The other companies were not motivated to enact a plan their sister company had developed and they resented not being trusted to create their own agenda. Second, the training that the 1SG gave to his soldiers was not delivered to the rest of the battalion with the same level of quality that he had mandated with his own company. Perhaps it was the lack of passion in the material

from the battalion training shop. Perhaps it was the lack of an external reinforcement system for the other companies. For whatever reason, the individual soldiers' efforts did not match the capabilities of the original ones success. Third, it was much more difficult to get the level of in-depth market analysis done for an entire battalion than it was for a single company. This difficulty resulted in lower-level quality data being given to the company command teams to enact a plan they were already opposed to. Finally, the original 1SG was excellent when it came to actively supervising the recruiters' efforts. He never directly micromanaged, but he knew his soldiers and was very gifted in knowing which ones needed the most attention and how to divide his time. This level of supervision was unmatched and could not be replicated by the other 1SGs. These issues and more led to the ultimate failure of Operation Fury Road and the commander and I were left embarrassed by the failure.

Once it was obvious that the operation was not going to work, the commander and I needed to decide on our next move. Most of the time if a leader is willing to fall on their sword and take the fault of a failure, higher levels of leadership are all too happy to let the failed leader go down with the ship. It absolves the higher ups from having to face any level of responsibility for green lighting the failed initiative. Because of this reality, some leaders who experience failure will quickly find a scapegoat and put the blame on them. While this may allow the leader to survive another day, it is a quick way to develop a reputation as a leader who is untrustworthy and will ultimately lead to a command climate of untrust and negativity. I am happy to say that my commander and I did not take that easy path to destruction.

Instead, we decided to be very public about the fact that Operation Fury Road was our initiative and failures were to be our responsibility. We delivered this message both up and down. The aftermath was twofold. First, our brigade lost some faith in our abilities for the short term. They sent a training team to us to help us understand our jobs and the failure was reflected in our OER and NCOER. Jokes about Operation Failed Road continued throughout our time in position. The second ramification was much more positive, however, because our subordinate leaders at all levels were impressed by our choice to absorb the responsibility at our level, and they began to demonstrate a deeper level of trust in us. Issues that they were either too worried or embarrassed to share with us before became non-taboo for them to bring up. We were given a level of trust and insight into our companies and stations that neither of us had experienced before. This insight and trust allowed us to foster an environment of success and positivity that both the command and the soldiers could enjoy and thrive in.

The lesson here is simple. While it is foolish to expect absolution for leadership failures, your soldiers will respect your choice to take responsibility and not play the blame game with others.

Hiding Mistakes

Hiding mistakes can destroy trust, erode confidence, and sometimes get you fired. One of the articles studied at the Sergeants Major Academy is titled *the Fall of the Warrior King*, and is about a very successful, pacesetting leader who hid a mistake while commanding in Iraq. Lieutenant Colonel Nate Sassaman was leading a successful unit when he came under investigation for allowing and even encouraging his unit to engage in unethical conduct against the Iraqi population. Prior to the investigation, he instructed the soldiers involved in the incident that triggered the investigation to "tell them about everything except the water."[4] In doing this, he had directed his soldiers to cover up a mistake where they made Iraqi citizens jump in a river as part of an interrogation. Once the mistake, and the attempt to cover it up was brought to light, Sassaman was relieved of command and his promising career sputtered to an end. While it is unknown if Sassaman would have survived the investigation if he would have come clean in the beginning, directing his soldiers to lie about their actions was the nail in the coffin. A less than honest mistake will almost always get you fired. It's always best to avoid mistakes completely, but when you make one, hiding it is never a good idea.

In addition to hiding mistakes, hiding honest things that look like mistakes can also erode the trust in an organization. When I (Robert) was a CSM, my unit was deployed to Kuwait, and we left our most competent senior NCO and officer in charge of the rear detachment. Our choice of rear detachment leadership was not popular with everyone because the officer looked kind of shaggy and didn't have the best military bearing. The NCO was a newly promoted master sergeant and was the highest-ranking NCO who didn't deploy. Both leaders were exceptionally competent, and we had no doubt that they would take care of the unit during our deployment.

One day after we had been deployed for about a month, I received a phone call from my master sergeant to talk about how things were going. He gave the usual report that not much was happening out of the ordinary with the exception that some of the rear detachment company commanders thought that our rear detachment battalion commander had faked his PT test and were making a fuss. He assured me that the PT test was legitimate, as he had given it to the commander himself. When I asked him who

else was there, he said no one. At this point I directed him to get the rear detachment battalion commander and take a PT test with the next unit that is conducting one. While I completely trust that the officer in this story had a legitimate PT test, there was a perception of nefarious activity and an abuse of power that was eroding trust within the unit. Once the PT test was conducted publicly, this perception changed. Thus, the moral of the story is that when you are in a visible leadership position and especially a command position, do as much as you can publicly with your soldiers. This demonstrates that you are willing to share the same experiences as your soldiers and is a way to build esprit de corps in the unit. soldiers always like to try to beat the commander or the command sergeant major on a PT test, or score more hits at the range, or finish their training first. In the case of my rear detachment team, everything worked out. However, similar scenario, under slightly different circumstances got one of my company commanders suspended, investigated, and eventually relieved. Again, hiding mistakes, or conducting private training events is never a good idea.

Ignoring the critics

Leaders appreciate ownership of failures and problems and if you are authentic in your self-accountability, most leaders will give you a chance to fix the problem. While there are exceptions, most failures due to honest mistakes do not need to be career enders. In fact, good leaders will appreciate a team member who is not satisfied with mediocre performance and will look to empower their team to seek self-improvement. There is always the chance, however, you may come across a leader or peer who looks to exploit situations in which a good team member experiences failure for their own self-interest. The easiest solution is to ignore it. If it comes from a peer, and you have done the right things to earn your boss's respect, then there is a high chance that the boss will understand. Own the failure and immediately start to review what happened to learn whatever lessons there are to learn while also planning your fail-safes ahead to avoid making the same mistake again. If your peer continues to try and flaunt your failure to make themselves look good, and you don't get drawn into a childish argument or feud, then the most likely outcome will be your boss seeing your peer for the selfish, non-team player that they are. Don't complicate your failure further by going down the mudslinging road, instead, take the road of ownership and self-improvement.

If your boss is your critic, solutions get more complicated. Supervisors have the power to make your life difficult, especially if the situation justifies holding your feet to the fire. When your boss provides you advice on how to improve, follow these steps to fast track a solution (Figure 6.2):

If your boss is your critic,

1. Avoid the blame game.
   - Don't try to make your boss share the blame, even if they are partly responsible, it won't help.
2. Take responsibility.
   - Own the mistake and shift focus immediately to solving the problem.
3. Act quickly.
   - The faster you begin repairing the damage, the more valuable you become to the solution and less likely to be removed from your position.
4. Acknowledge human error.
   - Understand that everyone makes mistakes; the best leaders take accountability and act to fix them.
5. Involve your boss constructively.
   - If your boss is focused on blame, redirect by asking for advice on how to fix the issue, not how to avoid it.
6. Build a solution-focused team.
   - Encourage collaboration with your boss to address the issue, shifting the dynamic from blame to resolution.
7. Strengthen the unit's climate.
   - By focusing on solutions rather than failure, you help create a healthier, more resilient organizational culture.

Figure 6.2. Ignoring the Critics.

It's entirely possible to encounter a workplace situation where someone faces the urge to place the blame of their failures one level down. This is about you taking accountability. In our military, we look for leaders who can take responsibility for both the good and bad and implement those lessons learned into new standard operating procedures. In Master Resiliency Training, NCOs address avoiding the "Them, Them, Them" thinking trap and understanding how our interactions play a role in the positive or negative outcome. While it can be tempting for some to point the finger at someone with less power to fight back, the ultimate eventual-

ity is that you will condition yourself to always place the blame on others. In doing so, you will eventually be called out for your cowardness and be held responsible.

Identifying Mistakes and Problems

Identifying problems is critical to solving them. There are several approaches to planning and problem solving that are all valuable. Every problem or mistake, however, is best corrected when matched with the most appropriate problem-solving methodology. The Army's doctrinal problem solving and planning methodologies are not useful when attempting to fix a system problem or correct a personnel mistake but are useful in planning an approach to a military operation. The inverse is also true. NCOs at all levels must understand the Army's planning methodologies and problem-solving methodologies from improvement science to best determine the approach they will use when solving problems. First, determine the exact issue and *type* of problem one is facing. Failing to do this may result in solving an issue that did not exist. Then it becomes a problem because we acted without all the information. Now a new problem exists. There are a multitude of ways to analyze a situation. However, the two methods we prefer are the Army's identification of the three types of problems and the Cynefin framework.

The US Army identifies three types of problems: well-structured, medium-structured, and ill-structured as outlined in doctrine like ATP 5-0.[1] Army Design Methodology and related planning publications; this classification helps leaders match appropriate tools, such as Troop Leading Procedures for well-structured issues, the military decision-making process for medium structured problems or Army Design Methodology for ill-structured ones.

The Cynefin framework, developed in 1999 by Dave Snowden while at IBM Global Services as a sense-making tool to navigate complexity (with "Cynefin" being a Welsh word meaning "habitat" or the multiple influencing factors in our environment), categorizes problems into five domains: obvious/clear (simple cause-effect, best-practice responses), complicated (expert analysis required), complex (emergent patterns, probe-sense-respond), chaotic (immediate stabilizing action needed), and disorder (uncertainty about the domain itself); it provides a more nuanced lens for ill-structured or dynamic challenges beyond the Army's three-type model.

We incorporate Cynefin because it complements the Army's doctrinal categories by offering deeper insight into truly complex and chaotic environments, particularly useful for NCOs facing adaptive, human-centered, or uncertain leadership problems, while it has seen growing informal adoption and discussion in Army circles (e.g., in Army War College

publications, Military Review articles, and Command and General Staff College exercises) as a practical enhancement to operations processes, though it remains supplementary rather than official doctrine.

While Cynefin is better for understanding difficult probem sets, the Army's approach is a simpler, and more appropriate place to begin.

	Well-structured	*Medium-structured*	*Ill-structured*
Perception	The problem is self-evident.	Leaders easily agree on its structure.	Leaders have difficulty agreeing on problem structure and will have to agree on a shared hypothesis.
Solution development	Solution techniques are available and there are verifiable solutions.	There may be more than one "right" answer. Leaders may disagree on the best solution. Leaders can agree on a desired end state.	Leaders will disagree on— How the problem can be solved. The most desirable end state. Whether the end state can be attained.
Execution of solution	Success requires learning to perfect technique.	Success requires learning to perfect techniques and to adjust the solution.	Success requires learning to perfect technique, adjust the solution, and continuously refine understanding of the problem.
Adaptive iteration	No adaptive iteration required.	Adaptive iteration is required to find the best solution.	Adaptive iteration is required to refine the problem structure and solutions.

Figure 6.3. Types of problems and Solution Strategies. ATP 5-0.1, Army Design Methodology, September 2025, page 4-1.

Army Problems

The Army has broken down problems into three types, well-structured, medium-structured, and ill-structured. Well-structured problems are those in which leaders believe the problem is self-evident, have known solutions, require specific techniques, and do not require adaptive iteration. A well-structured problem might be getting a flat tire on one's way to work. We know the problem is the tire, we know the solution is to change it, we must know how to change it, and we do not need to refine our solution during the rest of our journey to work.

In the case of a medium structured problem, the solution may not be self-evident, but leaders can identify the problem. There may be more than one way to solve the problem which may lead to disagreement. Adaptive iteration, or trial-and-error, may be required. Take the example of a car that gets two flat tires on the way to work. We have a spare and can put that one on, but now we have choices, do we call a tow truck, our supervisor, our spouse to assist with a new tire? In addition to figuring out how to change the second tire, we can't be sure that the two flat tires are the real problem. The problem may be loose bolts on the steering linkage that are rubbing

on the inside of the tires and causing the flat, which we will discover as we drive further down the road and get two more flat tires. Now, we have tried new tires, but we need a new technique (tightening some loose bolts) to solve the real problem, and now we must figure out how to get two new tires for our next iterations of the solution.

With ill-structured problems, leaders cannot even agree that there is a problem or if it even has any structure. There will be disagreement on how the problem will be solved, what the desired end state is, or even if it is feasible. To successfully solve an ill-structured problem, one will have to try multiple techniques that must be adjusted to the problem through an adaptive iterative process. In the case of the flat tire, it would become an ill-structured problem if all four tires became flat at once, and no mechanical reason or road hazard could be detected. We know we have flat tires, but we have no idea why. To complicate the problem further, our cell phone is dead, and it appears that the gas tank is empty. Perhaps someone sabotaged the car the night before, or there is an extremely coincidental string of problems that all happened at once. We know we want to make it to work on time, but we also know we have no ability to call for help, and we don't want to leave our car on the side of the road. Something is indeed wrong, but we are not sure what it is, or how it might be solved.

Cynefin Framework

Another tool for problem identification that is used frequently in the business world is the Cynefin Framework. It's is a framework that categorizes problems into five domains: Obvious, Complicated, Complex, Chaotic, and Disorder.[5] The purpose behind the use of the Cynefin Framework is to further clarify the type of problem you are facing and apply an appropriate plan of action in dealing with it.

Obvious problems are familiar or commonly known problems that have easy to identify solutions and don't require subject matter expertise in their handling. The other four domains, however, are different versions of the Army's ill-structured problem type. Some leaders find comfort in having a better identification system than just well-structured, medium-structured, and ill-structured. Having a deeper understanding of types of ill-structured problems create conditions that equip you to tackle them.

By applying the Cynefin Framework, Army leaders can gain a more refined lens through which to view operational, tactical, and even interpersonal challenges. Rather than treating all problems as the same type of ill-structured issue, leaders can better tailor their approach, whether that

Obvious (or Clear)

These are problems with known solutions, best practices, and clear cause-and-effect relationships. Leaders simply need to sense, categorize, and respond.

Example: Replacing a flat tire on a Humvee or completing a standard weapons qualification range—these are routine tasks with established procedures.

Complicated

These problems have clear solutions but require expert analysis or specialized knowledge. There is a direct relationship between cause and effect, but it's not immediately obvious. Leaders must sense, analyze, and respond.

Example: Diagnosing and repairing an advanced system malfunction in a communications vehicle. It may require coordination with technical experts and multiple tests to identify the issue.

Complex

In complex situations, cause and effect can only be understood in hindsight. These problems require probing, sensing, and responding, often through experimentation or iterative planning.

Example: Building long-term trust with local populations during a stability operation. There is no guaranteed formula for success, and progress is often nonlinear and influenced by many interdependent variables like culture, politics, and historical grievances.

Chaotic

These are high-turbulence situations with no clear relationship between cause and effect. Immediate action is needed to reestablish order. Leaders must act, sense, and respond.

Example: The initial moments of an ambush or a natural disaster striking a base. The focus is on quickly stabilizing the situation—securing personnel, regaining control, and restoring communication—before transitioning to longer-term problem-solving.

Disorder

This domain represents uncertainty about which of the other four domains applies. It occurs when there is confusion or disagreement about the nature of the problem itself. The key is to break the problem down into parts and assign them to the appropriate domain.

Example: When a new mission is suddenly assigned with vague intent and multiple competing directives, units may initially struggle to determine priorities, roles, or even the nature of the challenge.

Figure 6.4. The Cynefin Framework.

means following standard procedures, calling in experts, experimenting with solutions, or taking decisive action in moments of crisis.

Mistakes, System Problems, and the Fundamental Attribution Error

The fundamental attribution error occurs when the behavior of others is interpreted as a reflection of their character, while excusing personal actions because of external circumstances.[6] It is a problem because NCOs

The Five Whys

1. Identify the problem clearly.

Start by stating the specific issue or failure you're trying to understand. Be as clear and concise as possible.Example: "The 1SG's vehicle failed to start this morning."

2. Ask "Why?" the problem occurred.

Look for a direct cause of the problem and write it down.Why? The battery was dead.

3. Ask "Why?" again based on the previous answer.

Drill deeper into the cause, seeking underlying reasons.Why? The battery wasn't charged.

4. Continue asking "Why?" until you've asked it five times (or until the root cause is identified).

Each answer should lead to the next "why," uncovering deeper layers of the issue. Why? The alternator wasn't functioning properly. Why? The alternator belt was worn out. Why? The vehicle hasn't had scheduled maintenance.

5. Identify the root cause and implement corrective action.

Once you reach a foundational issue, plan and execute steps to correct it, and prevent recurrence.

Optional but useful:

Document each step for team learning or after-action review.

Verify the root cause by asking, "If we fix this, will the problem be prevented?"

Figure 6.5. The Five "Whys."

could look at the mistakes that soldiers are making without ever looking at the system that is facilitating it. For example, attributing laziness to a soldier's character who failed their ACFT, but not realizing that she has been in the field for 90 days leading up to the test sitting in an ambulance covering a brigade's worth of gunnery exercises. The soldier is blamed for a system issue.

It is important that leaders seek to find the second, third, tertiary, and quaternary order effects of an action before passing judgment. Be curious, not judgmental. While the fundamental attribution error may be difficult to eliminate entirely, one can take steps to mitigate its effect and help leaders to place blame where it belongs. There are several approaches to detecting an error, but the simplest is to conduct a root cause analysis that includes the five whys.[7] If we can ask why something is happening five times, we will come to the real cause of a problem, however it is not the number of whys that are important, it is to keep asking until the root cause of an issue is identified.

Fixing the System

Once a system error is recognized and acknowledged, the fix is often more than just a simple adjustment. Systems are already complicated. When people are involved, who are always unpredictable, systems can become more complex than necessary. If a soldier is showing up late for formation, there is a reason for the tardiness that is not related to the soldier deciding that she or he wanted to be late. In some cases, this is a simple flat tire or failure to set an alarm. In other cases, the root cause may be that the soldier grew up in an environment that did not value timelines, making the habit difficult to break. In any case, it is the responsibility of the leader to attempt to correct the soldier's behavior, and when possible, make changes to the system that is enabling it.

If NCOs believe the fundamental attribution error is real, and that their soldier's behavior is shaped by the system they are in, then poor performance can be improved by changing the system. This is the premise behind improvement science, and it is important that NCOs understand the process. Not discounting Kotter's 8-Step Training Model for organizational change that we addressed , the six core principles of improvement science (identify the problem, understand the current system, develop a theory of improvement, test the change (PDSA Cycle), measure results, sustain and scale) represent a scientific approach to a specific problem within a system.[8] These problems can be large or small, well-structured, or ill-structured. The type and complexity of the problem does not matter, the process is the same, and it can be used by anyone.

Make the Work Problem-Specific and User-Centered

1. Identify the Problem

Making a problem specific and user-centered, means identifying the specific issue that needs to be solved. When doing this, it is best to engage the people who see the problem or are causing the problem early and often. If there is a problem in your unit with soldiers not taking leave throughout the year and having an excess of use-or-lose leave at the end of the year, the fundamental attribution error would suggest that soldiers are not managing their leave appropriately. These soldiers should know better, and if they don't, they have first-line leaders who are failing them. Looking at this same problem through the lens of improvement science, however, might reveal soldiers are not requesting leave for legitimate reasons that highlight a problem in the organization's leave policies. A key point here is that the problem must be user centered. If the issue is only examined from the view of a senior NCO, and not the view of the soldiers accumulating use-or-lose leave, appropriate fixes to a broken system might not ever be identified, let alone corrected.

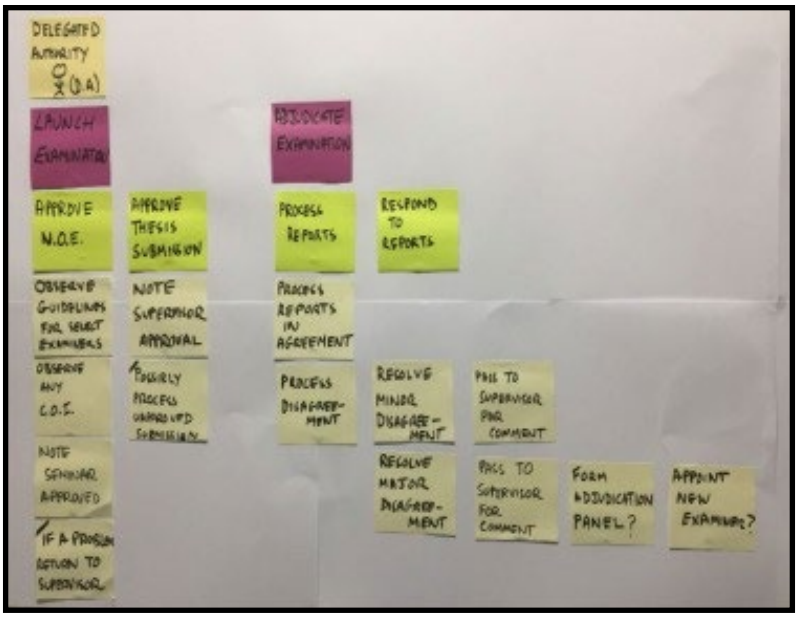


Figure 6.6. Sticky Note Visualization.

2. Variation in Performance is the Core Problem to Address (Develop a Theory of Improvement)

Here, the question NCOs must ask is "not what works, but what works, for whom and under what set of conditions."[9] How a first sergeant gets her leave processed does not translate to the experience of other users within the system facing a similar set of conditions. For the first sergeant, she may be able to walk into the commander's office, ask the commander to go into IPSA and approve the leave form. A soldier in that same unit may have to submit the request three weeks in advance and attach a copy of their latest PT card, Height and Weight form, LES, TRIPs report, safety pledge, MEDPROS printout, and DTMS training report. Thus, the soldier is experiencing a complicated process that takes a week or two to get the documents together and submitted, if they have access to a computer. In this scenario, the system may be working for the first sergeant but not for the average soldier. Thus, the variation within the system is causing the variation in outcomes. Senior personnel are easily submitting their requests for absences, while the junior personnel are not, or are doing it late because of the additional complexity they face.

3. See the System (Understand the Current System)

To "see" the system, visualize all parts of an individual process, task, or request to understand where disconnects or tensions occur. In the case

of the use-or-lose leave, there may just be a bottleneck in the system where the training room delays giving a soldier their MEDPROS report, or there is only one computer in the platoon and the platoon leader is not sharing it with the soldiers. It could also be that the commander is only signing requests for absence on Fridays. A good tool for seeing the system is the creation of a fishbone diagram or building a system model with sticky notes. The only people who can truly visualize a system without this process are those who experience it in an eternal professional loop. In our scenario, the first sergeant will not visualize the system as well as the private because they both experience it at different levels. Therefore, it is critical, as with identifying variation, that junior personnel are involved in identifying the parts of the system.

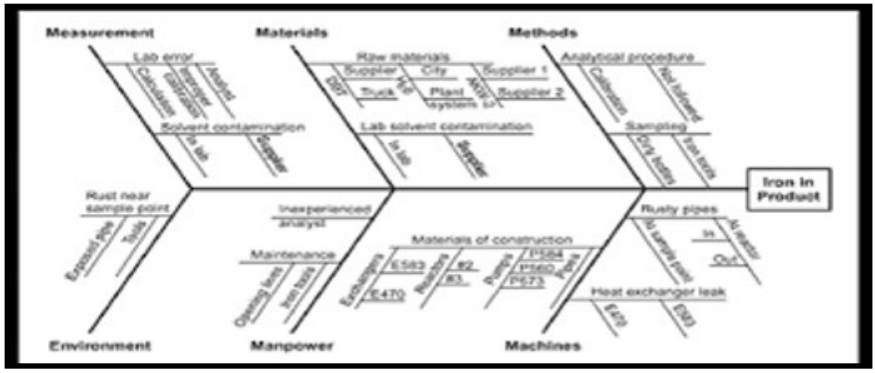


Figure 6.7. Fishbone Diagram.

4. We Cannot Improve What We Cannot Measure (Measure the Improvement)

It is entirely possible NCOs will witness command teams attempting to improve areas that are not clearly measurable. For instance, I (Robert) once worked with a commander whose goal was to "build trust in the command team." Their strategy was to make decision-making more transparent. While well-intentioned, the issue with this approach is that "trust in the command" is an abstract concept, difficult to assess unless it's clearly defined and paired with measurable indicators. Without explicitly inviting and facilitating situations that build trust, it's nearly impossible to determine whether progress is being made. In contrast, consider a more measurable problem that provides indicators of trust: soldiers accumulating excessive use-or-lose leave because they do not feel the commander would approve leave outside of a block leave period, or perhaps did not plan their leave in advance. In this case, the data already exists in the

commander's monthly reports, which track leave balances across the formation. A team focused on improving this system could establish clear benchmarks for how much leave should be used throughout the year. soldiers falling outside those benchmarks could then be proactively engaged to ensure they have a plan to take leave. Additionally, actionable metrics could include the time it takes for leave forms to be processed or how long soldiers spend assembling required documents. Unlike abstract goals, these indicators allow for targeted, data-informed improvement.

5. Anchor Practice Improvement in Disciplined Inquiry (Test the Change)

The concept of disciplined inquiry is sometimes difficult to execute because people tend to make decisions based on gut feelings or anecdotal experience. The best method of disciplined inquiry is to implement Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycles in which we attempt to "learn fast, fail fast, and learn quickly."[10] The idea behind the PDSA cycle is to make the smallest effective change possible to get the desired outcome. The PDSA cycle involves identifying the variation in performance that is related to the problem that one is addressing and planning an iterative change, implementing the change, studying the effect of the change, and then acting on the information from the study. This is an iterative approach to improvement as it makes small changes within a system as quickly as possible and assesses the outcome before another change is implemented. In a more exhaustive approach, people may attempt to implement a variety of changes at the same time, and never know if one, none, or all the changes were successful. In looking at our case of the use-or-lose leave problem, an iterative approach would be to remove one requirement at a time to see if the submission of requests is sped up until the desired outcome is met. If after the requirements have been changed and no improvement is made, then one might look at the policy surrounding who is reviewing the requests or on what days the commander is signing them.

6. Accelerate Improvements Through Networked Communities (Sustain at Scale)

When the PDSA cycles are complete, or even during the implementation process, use the knowledge of others to solve your problem. In our scenario, using a networked community would be as simple as asking another unit who did not have a problem with use-or-lose leave how they managed the process. Couple the information garnered from resources within one's community and the other steps of the improvement science problem solving methodology, almost any problem can be solved. It is also important for

NCOs to understand the approaches the military used for planning as they directly correlate to a doctrinal approach to problem solving.

Military Planning (Problem Solving) Methodologies

Like many things in the military, the Army developed its own set of problem-solving approaches known as planning processes. These processes consist of Troop Leading Procedures (TLP) for company level well-structured problems, the Military Decision-making Process (MDMP) for well-structured and medium structured problems. the Army Problem Solving process for a variety of problems, and Army Design Methodology (ADM) for ill-structured problems.[11] These approaches to planning are also problem-solving tools and are effective when applied to the appropriate level and type of problem. In contrast to the Army's planning methodologies, improvement science approaches to problem solving tend to be iterative and are implemented as fast as possible in hopes of accelerating learning so that a problem can be understood, and its root cause addressed. In addition, improvement science techniques can be implemented by a single person or an entire staff. On the other hand, the Army's doctrinal approaches of MDMP and ADM which both require a robust staff to execute properly, are more suited for operational or strategic level problems.

1. Troop Leading Procedures
(Tactical Level & Well-Structured Problems)

Troop Leading Procedures consist of an eight-step process and are designed to help company level leadership solve well-structured problems and implement operations orders. TLP is the simplest of the Army's approach to planning and problem solving and consists of eight steps: receive the mission, issue the warning order, make a tentative plan, initiate movement, conduct reconnaissance, complete the plan, issue the order, and supervise and refine the plan as needed. As one can see from the steps within this process, the TLP framework is more suitable for military operations at the company level which involve well-defined problems[35] than for systems related or ill-structured problems. However, when given the mission of occupying an assembly area, the TLP is the best planning process to use.

2. Military Decision-Making Process

When staff officers and NCOs hear the term MDMP, it is usually preceded by a litany of inappropriate adjectives. When conducted in its entirety, the MDMP is a great tool for detailed planning and can be used to solve both well-structured and medium structured problems. Typically,

MDMP is conducted at the battalion or higher, but the division level is the first level of the Army's hierarchical structure that is staffed to the levels needed to perform all steps and sub-steps within MDMP to standard. We won't go into detail on this, but NCOs should know that MDMP is a complicated problem-solving tool that is extremely valuable in the creation of detailed plans and orders aimed at solving operational problems within a multi-domain environment. The seven main steps of MDMP are receiving the mission, mission analysis, course of action development, course of action analysis, course of action comparison, course of action approval, and orders production. An abbreviated version of MDMP exists called the Rapid Decision-Making Process (RDMP) and is employed when there are inadequate resources or time to enact the full MDMP process. See FM 6-0 for a detailed explanation of how to conduct each step, sub-step, and task within MDMP and RDMP. We believe sergeants should be familiar with the seven steps of MDMP, while senior NCOs should be familiar with the steps, sub-steps, and tasks, and MDMP is the process that the Army uses to generate operations orders.

3. Army Problem Solving

The Army's simplest problem-solving process that is applicable to a variety of problems consists of seven steps and can be employed by a single person or an entire organization. While we do not believe this process is as useful in addressing systems problems, as the improvement science approach or in planning solutions in military operations as TLP and MDMP, it is a great tool for junior leaders to apply when trying to solve well-structured or medium structured problems within their organizations. The steps within this process are; gather information, identify the problem, develop criteria, generate possible solutions, analyze possible solutions, compare possible solutions and make and implement the decision. See FM 6-0 for a detailed explanation of how to conduct Army problem solving.

4. Army Design Methodology

Army Design Methodology is the Army's application of design thinking in attempts to solve ill-structured problems and prepare for black swan events. ADM combines the best critical and creative thinking available to help commanders and staff understand, visualize, and describe conceptual approaches to planning in ill-structured operational environments. Like MDMP, ADM is a complicated and staff intensive process that is best conducted at division or higher. However, the basic premise of ADM is valuable at any level because it involves the use of design thinking. Simply put, ADM begins with describing the current state of the opera-

tional environment through the application of the operational variables, then goes on the frame the desired end-state. Next the differences between the current state and the desired end-state are analyzed and the problem is defined. Once the problem is defined, a conceptual operational approach is developed with the goal of turning the current state into the desired end-state.[12] This process is like what Dr. Stephen Covey refers to as "beginning with the end in mind," as it forces planners to envision a future where an ill-structured problem does not exist. As with the previous Army problem solving methodologies, ADM is an excellent tool for solving ill-structured operational type problems.[13] However, ADM is also good for smaller level problems and is extremely useful for problem identification. Like MDMP, we believe sergeants should understand the concepts of ADM, and senior NCOs should be intimately familiar with it. For a detailed discussion of ADM and how to apply it see ATP 5.01.

Perfection is the Enemy of Progress

No matter the problem or the approach that one uses to develop and implement a course of action it is vital to ensure follow-through results. When leaders spend all their time planning and never get to the implementation phase, we call this paralysis by analysis. People in these situations tend to be looking for the 100% solution to a problem when a 40% solution would solve 90% of the problem. Perfection is the enemy of progress. Aim towards accelerating learning about the problem rather than completely solving it, and you will make much more progress than those who want a 100% solution. We like to think of a phrase that Orson Scott Card used in his book *Ender's Game* where the main character is trying to orient his team to the battle space and he says "The enemy's gate is down."[14] These words allow his team to see the battle space differently than his opponents and understand that movement towards the enemy's gate is a step towards overcoming the obstacles in front of them and making progress towards a solution. Now that you know where the problem is, do something about it.

Mistakes facilitate growth. Honest mistakes do not define a person's career or character. If the mistakes are acknowledged and solutions are developed and acted upon, growth happens internally but it's also being witnessed by subordinates, peers, and leaders. In fact, when soldiers learn lessons in an environment that advocates and encourages initiative but also allows for failures and mistakes in low-stake situations, that growth becomes an integral part of that soldier's character. Developing soldiers is a priority for the NCO corps. Learn from mistakes, and when possible, learn from the mistakes of others. In turn, that also translates into let-

ting your colleagues and peers learn from your mistakes. Instead of hiding them, allow transparency to facilitate your professional and personal growth. Sunlight has always been an effective disinfectant.

Questions for Discussion

- **Dignity and Respect**

  Reflect on a time when you, like the author in the article 15 story, used theatrics or harshness during discipline (e.g., yelling, dramatic actions). How did it affect the soldier, the observing command team, and your credibility as a leader? What changes would you make now to ensure dignity and respect while still conveying the seriousness of misconduct?

- **Self-Centered Motivation**

  In Ranger School, the author (Richard) initially focused on his own passing grade rather than his squad's needs, leading to failure. How can leaders avoid the trap of self-centered motivation during high-stress leadership positions? Discuss ways to prioritize soldier welfare first while still accomplishing the mission.

- **Owning Failures**

  Describe a situation where a leader took full responsibility for a failed initiative. How did it build trust versus erode it? Why is publicly absorbing blame often more effective for long-term team cohesion than shifting responsibility downward?

- **Hiding Mistakes**

  Hiding mistakes or even the appearance of impropriety (e.g., the rear detachment PT test story) can destroy trust. How can leaders at platoon through battalion levels ensure actions like training, testing, or decisions are conducted transparently and publicly to prevent perceptions of favoritism or abuse?

- **The Fundamental Attribution Error**

  Think of a recent soldier performance issue in your unit (e.g., tardiness, failing a test). How might you apply the "five whys" or root cause analysis to determine if it's a system problem rather than individual laziness?

- **Improvement Science**

  Using improvement science principles (e.g., make the problem user-centered, see the system, measure variation, PDSA cycles), how

would you address a unit problem like excessive use-or-lose leave? Involve soldiers early—how might their input reveal bottlenecks that senior leaders overlook?

- **The Anatomy of a Problem**

  The Army categorizes problems as well-structured, medium-structured, or ill-structured (from ATP 5-0.1). Classify the following and explain your choice: (a) a soldier repeatedly failing ACFT due to field time; (b) planning a company-level range; (c) low morale after a failed operation with unclear causes. Which Army planning process (TLP, MDMP, Army Problem Solving, ADM) fits each?

- **Pacesetting and Standards**

  Pacesetting leadership can inspire through high standards but risks coming across as boastful or unattainable. How can leaders balance leading by example with humility? Share how openly discussing your own past mistakes (as the author does with students) builds trust and encourages subordinates to admit errors.

- **Perfection**

  Describe a time when you or your unit delayed action seeking a "100% solution." What small, iterative change (like a PDSA cycle) could have accelerated learning and improvement instead?

- **Making Mistakes**

  How can NCOs create a command climate where soldiers feel safe to take initiative, make (recoverable) mistakes in training, and openly discuss failures without fear of career damage? What role does sharing personal stories play in this?

Recommended Further Reading

Real Leadership and the US Army: Overcoming a Failure of Imagination to Conduct Adaptive Work by John B. Richardson, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlise, PA, 2011.

"Future Army Challenges and NCO Development," by Command Sgt. Maj. Neil H. Sartain, *The NCO Journal*, March 2025.

"The Battle of Leyte: An NCO's Analysis," by Master Sgt. Norman Robles Jr., *The NCO Journal*, March 2025.

Endnotes

1. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (July 2019), preamble to Chapter 5, on leading others, begins with the following quote from General of the Army Omar N. Bradley: "The American soldier…demands professional competence in his leaders. In battle, he wants to know that the job is going to be done right, with no unnecessary casualties. The noncommissioned officer wearing the chevron is supposed to be the best soldier in the platoon and he is supposed to know how to perform all the duties expected of him. The American soldier expects his sergeant to be able to teach him how to do his job. And he expects even more from his officers."

2. United States. Department of the Army. "NCO Creed." *Army Values.*

3. Dan. McCarthy, (n.d.).*What Is Pacesetting Leadership? Pros/Cons, Examples, & More*, Great Leadership, What Is Pacesetting Leadership? Pros/Cons, Examples, & More (greatleadershipbydan.com).

4. Dexter Filkins, "The Fall of the Warrior King," *New York Times*, October 23, 2005, nytimes.com/2005/10/23/magazine/the-fall-of-the-warrior-king.html

5. "About – Cynefin Framework," *The Cynefin Co*, 30 Sept. 2021, thecynefin.co/About-us/About-cynefin-framework.

6. "Fundamental Attribution Error: What It Is and How to Avoid It," *Business Insights Blog*, *Harvard Business School,* 8 June 2017, online.hbs.edu/blog/post/the-fundamental-attribution-error.

7. Olivier Serrat, *Knowledge Solutions,* (Springer eBook*s*, 2017), 307–10. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0983-9_32.

8. Michael Bold, Change Happens Because People Find That it Works to Their Benefit. (US Army 2019) https://www.army.mil/article/217441/change_happens_because_people_find_that_it_works_to_their_benefit

9. James Reason, "Human Error: Models and Management," *BMJ (Clinical Research Ed.)* vol. 320, no. 7237 (2000): 768-70. doi:10.1136/bmj.320.7237.768

10. Julie E. Reed, et al. "The Foundations of Quality Improvement Science," *Future Hospital Journal* vol. 3, no. 3 (2016): 199-202. doi:10.7861/futurehosp.3-3-199.

11. ADP 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate), July 2019, Para 2-97, Para 2-92, Para 2-99.

12. ATP 5-0.1, *Army Design Methodology* (Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate), July 2015.

13. Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Free Press, 1989), Chapter 2.

14. Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game* (London: Orbit, 1999).

Chapter 7

Counseling Effectively and With Empathy

Great leaders get their followers to accomplish more than they thought they could, and the best way to do this is through excellent counseling. It is an unfortunate reality that excellent counseling seldom happens in the Army. Often, counseling doesn't happen at all. The US Army knows, through empirical research, that counseling is a highly effective way to improve performance.[1] NCOs know counseling works, yet in our experience, tend to focus very little effort on making sure it happens, and when it does happen, the quality of the counseling session (unless it's corrective in nature) is generally poorly conceived, planned, and executed.

Definitions

Counseling, as it relates to being a leader in the Army, is extremely important. Clearly defined terms, like coaching, mentoring, and counseling, are all aimed at getting a subordinate to do something they might not normally do, or perform a task at a higher level, which are both the essence of influence. For those new to Army doctrine, ATP 6-22.1 *Providing Feedback: Counseling–Coaching–Mentoring* provides a deep explanation of how leaders can improve their soldiers through feedback, and offers multiple suggestions on when and how to use coaching, mentoring, and counseling.[2] While this primer does not cover everything that ATP 6-22 explains, it highlights some of the topics especially saliant to counseling. For NCOs, especially those early in their leadership journey, this doctrine offers a practical foundation for turning feedback into effective daily leadership practice

Coaching

In a rare statement of humility, Vince Lombardy supposedly once said "I have found that I am a better coach when I have better players."[3] I (Robert) couldn't agree more. For most of my time as a leader, I have been fortunate enough to be surrounded by great players. Some were so good that I conducted very little coaching and believed myself to be a much better leader than was the case. To this day, I lament that I did not spend more time coaching my soldiers. Thus, the first key point about coaching; everyone needs it, even your best soldiers can always become better through coaching.

While this section started with a quote from a football coach, coaching in the Army is radically different from coaching in professional sports. ATP

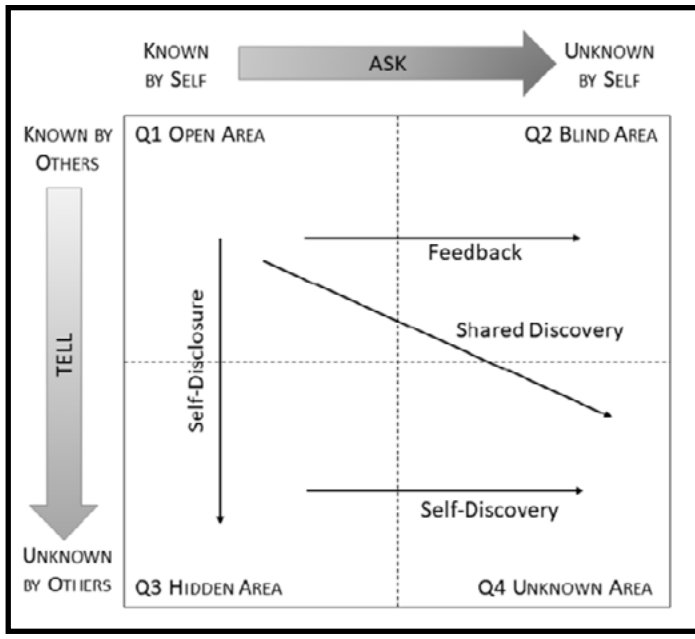


Figure. 7.1. The Johari Window.

6-22.1 explains that coaching is best used when a leader wants to guide their soldiers towards learning or improving their skills. A few subtle differences change the dynamic from counseling to coaching. First, coaching is voluntary and confidential; it is impossible to coach someone who does not wish to be coached. This requires that subordinates be transparent with their coach. Next, coaching "is meant to be supportive rather than directive," and the subordinate should do most of the talking, while the coach guides the discussion.[4] This is an example of an indirect approach to feedback, and it is effective because the subordinate discovers what they need to do to improve through guided reflection rather than their leader directing their thoughts and actions. Thus, the subordinate retains responsibility for developing their plan of action and the outcomes of that plan.

To be a good coach, a leader should spend time preparing for the session. This means asking the subordinate to provide as much data as possible for the coach to review prior to the session. This way the coach will have a greater understanding of what areas the subordinate might want to work to improve. WARNING: If you try to coach a Soldier without adequate preparation, it will show, and you will lose credibility in front of your Soldier. Once the leader has studied the subordinate's measurable performance, she or he can engage in the coaching session. During this session, the leader will work on building rapport, gathering,

and analyzing new information, addressing information gaps, narrowing the focus of the session, helping the subordinate to set goals, planning development and encouraging action.[5]

One of the main frameworks that a leader can do in coaching is that of the Johari Window. The Johari Window was developed in 1955 by psychologists Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham as a model for understanding self-awareness and interpersonal relationships. The framework is built on a simple but powerful premise: individuals do not see themselves completely, and effective growth depends on reducing blind spots through honest feedback and shared discovery. By organizing self-knowledge into four quadrants—what is known and unknown to oneself and to others—the Johari Window provides leaders a structured way to think about how perception, feedback, and communication shape development. For NCOs, this matters because leadership is not only about giving direction, but about helping soldiers understand how they are seen, how they perform, and where they can improve.

The Army incorporates this framework into its leadership doctrine in ATP 6-22.1, where it is presented as a practical tool for developing self-awareness through structured feedback and dialogue. The four quadrants consist of the open area–what a person and others know to be true about the person, the blind area–what is unknown to the person about themself but others know, the hidden area–what the person knows about themself, but others do not know, and the unknown–what the person or others do not know about the person.[6] This is an important framework because it allows a leader, through conversation and study to identify issues that might be in the person's blind spot. When a coach identifies a blind spot, they must seek to make the subordinate aware of it. When they do this, the subordinate's open area of their Johari Window becomes larger, and their blind area becomes smaller. The goal of using this tool is to help subordinates to shrink their blind spot as much as possible.

At the end of a coaching session, the subordinate should have a better understanding of their abilities, competencies, strengths, and weaknesses. Once they understand these things, the coach will guide them to develop a plan for improvement through decreasing weakness and/or capitalizing on capabilities. Since the subordinate will not have been directed to take any one specific action by the coach, they will feel more empowered to enact their plan through the increased level of self-efficacy that the coaching process instills.

If you desire to engage in coaching, be sure to prepare yourself for the session by analyzing the soldier's performance and understanding that

coaching takes time and patience. When the enemy is cresting the hill and time is limited, coaching is not a good choice of feedback methods to employ. Coaching takes time and will usually require a multitude of sessions to get the desired results.

Mentoring

Mentoring is like coaching and counseling, but on a deeper level. Like coaching, mentoring is voluntary, but the nuanced difference is that a mentor must be chosen by the mentee, and the mentor must agree to the relationship. Mentors and mentees can exist outside of professional relationships, and the mentor has usually accomplished something that the mentee hopes to accomplish. They may be geographically separated by time and position. Mentees can even have higher positions than their mentors. Mentorship is a very fluid framework. I (Robert) have several instances of people whom I have mentored who are in or have been in higher positions than myself. A common example of this relationship can exist between an officer (higher position) and an NCO (higher levels of experience). Successful mentoring relationships are based on trust, respect, communication, the availability of time, and realistic expectations.[7] These requirements of mentoring are important because all of them are necessary for mentoring to be effective. True mentorship is time intensive, and if you do not have the time to do it right, it is best to not do it at all.

ATP 6-22.1 lists four stages to mentoring: the prescriptive, the persuasive, the collaborative, and the confirmative.[8]

Like coaching, mentorship is a slow and deliberate process that is ill-suited for quick corrections and short-term gains. In most cases, these relationships can be career or life-long, and the progression from stage to stage is fluid and real results will take time to achieve. Despite its pace, mentorship is a very important process in the development of a leader, and if you do not have a mentor, you should consider getting one. When searching for a mentor, identify someone whom you wish to emulate and study their behavior for a few months to determine if this is really someone you want to be like. Once you are sure that you have identified a good mentor, approach them, and ask if they will mentor you. When you engage in this conversation, be sure to list all your expectations of a mentor, and the extent at which you are willing to commit as a mentee. If you both agree that a mentor-mentee relationship should be established, consider drafting a mentorship agreement that outlines what each party will be responsible for (see page 66 of ATP 6-22.1 for an example of a mentorship agreement). While these agreements are non-binding, putting something

In the **prescriptive stage,** the mentee usually has little experience within their position, and the mentor provides direct and detailed guidance. This is when self-esteem is developed.

In the **persuasive state**, the mentor attempts to persuade the mentee to find new approaches through suggestions, questions and challenges.

In the **collaborative stage**, the mentee has gained enough experience to work independently within their role and collaborates with the mentor to determine the next position, job, or action the mentee should consider. Here the mentor is serving more as a role model than in other stages.

The final stage is the **confirmation stage** and in it the mentee is successful in their own right. The mentor becomes a sounding board and trusted advisor to the mentee in this stage.

Figure. 7.2. Four Stages of Mentoring.

in writing is always a helpful approach to ensure that each party follows through with their commitments.

> *I (Richard) had the pleasure of coaching a former subordinate named SFC Smith. What started as professional counseling on their job performance grew to be something more. It started with the first time he called me looking for advice on how to handle a difficult Soldier who was refusing to follow directions. While the easy solution would have been to recommend appropriate punishment or retraining, I asked Smith what was leading to this behavior. The Soldier in question had always been a hard worker and intelligent team player, so his change in character was baffling to both Smith and me. Without getting into too many details about the Soldier's life, I will just say that he was going through some traumatic personal issues that led to a dramatic scene at the office.*
>
> *Smith and I stayed on the phone a long time and developed a plan of action with both the Soldier and the office in mind. The*



Figure. 7.3. Counseling with Empathy. Dale Cordes, untitled, 2026, graphite on paper, Lawrence, Kansas.

next day, My Commander and I met Smith early at the office to help support the action. In the end, we got the Soldier the help he needed, and he returned to work later that month with a newfound vigor for work and loyalty to the company. After that, I found Smith calling me frequently looking for advice on everything from specific issues to general career concerns. I

found myself invested in his future and well-being even after our time working together had passed. Two days ago, Smith once again called me seeking advice on his transition out of the Army upon retirement. While I believe there may be better leaders out there who could help guide him, I will always appreciate the fact that he chose me as his mentor.

Counseling

Counseling is the most common form of feedback in the Army. It is different from coaching and mentoring in that it is based on one's performance either over time or in a single event. Depending on the circumstance, the approach to counseling can be either direct, indirect, or a combination of the two (combined). Counseling is also mandatory and does not require the consent of the subordinate for it to be an effective tool for feedback. There are a multitude of reasons why one would counsel their subordinate. They include developmental, performance, professional growth, event focused (superior or substandard performance on one event), reception and integration, crisis, referral, promotion, and transition (including adverse separation) counseling.[9]

Like coaching and mentoring, counseling also consists of several discrete stages. These stages are: identify the need for counseling, prepare for the counseling, conduct the counseling session, and follow-up.[10] While most of these stages are self-explanatory, there's a real need to focus on the follow-up. The process of closing out a counseling form is a simple process, but for some reason, it never seems to get done. The follow-up is important because this is when the leader determines if the plan of action was successful. A common phrase throughout the Army is that a plan never survives first contact. This same is true of a counseling statement. In many cases, the plan of action will go awry or require modification. When the leader takes the time to observe that things are not going as planned and adjusts the plan of action in writing, it communicates to the Soldier that the leader cares. It's a demonstration of following a plan through to its conclusion. When everything goes well, and the leader takes the time to provide positive feedback in writing to the Soldier, it shows that the leader cares about acknowledging their successes. The follow-up is a way to demonstrate caring and that counseling is a continuing process meant to facilitate professional growth. It takes time, effort, and a genuine desire on behalf of the leader to make it work.

The Pygmalion Effect and Why Counseling Works

In 1964, a psychiatrist, Dr. Robert Rosenthal, conducted an experiment where he examined the IQs of elementary school children and then assigned

Army Training Publication (ATP) 6-22.1 describes the Army's counseling process. This publication is dedicated completely to feedback and the counselling process.

Field Manual (FM) 7-21.13 covers developmental and performance counseling in chapter six.

FM 6-22 has two appendixes (B and C) dedicated to the counseling process.

The Army also has a counseling website (within the Center for Army Leadership) dedicated to helping leaders become better counselors.

Figure. 7.4. Counseling Resources.

them to teachers in groups based on their respective intelligence scores. The catch, however, was that the children were assigned to the teachers randomly and not by IQ results. At the end of the year the students who were assigned to teachers who believed they were getting highly intelligent students outperformed the students whose teachers were told their students had low IQs. Since the students were randomly assigned to the groups, the high and low scores should have been equally distributed between the groups.[11] Rosenthal coined this the Pygmalion Effect after a Greek poem in which a sculpture wished for one of his sculptures to be brought to life.[12] You may recognize the Pygmalion Effect by its more commonly known name, the self-fulfilling prophecy, which states people will act as expected.

Counseling is important because soldiers will act in ways that align with how they see themselves and with what you expect of them. It offers leaders the opportunity to become involved in the self-fulfilling prophecy that each Soldier will enact. When done well, the Soldier will develop high levels of efficacy, they will see themselves as capable of great things, and the leader will know what they need to do to help the Soldier meet their goals. This is what a renowned psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck termed the growth mindset, and it makes all the difference in the cultivation of a person's ability to learn how to accomplish a task.[13] Counseling is a foundational leadership skill. The Army recognizes this and has dedicated numerous resources to improving counseling across the enterprise.

Sensemaking and Sensegiving (Theories of Influence)

One of the reasons that counseling is such an effective tool in the creation of good soldiers is that it helps the individual engage in the act of sensemaking through the act of sensegiving.[14] Sensemaking is how people make sense of the stimuli within their environment. Simply put, it is how they frame the information in a way that makes sense based on their experience and knowledge. It's their living and situational context. When we witness something we don't understand, our minds instantly go to work to explain it. New soldiers will not have the experience or tacit knowledge of the Army, many seemingly normal events may disrupt their sensemaking process. When an individual's sensemaking process breaks down, they will often act in ways that are outside of normal behavior, or even dangerous to themselves and those around them.

If sensemaking is how people make sense of their environments, and then act in accordance with their interpretations, sensegiving is a tool that leaders can use to influence the sensemaking in their subordinates. This is why counseling works, especially for new soldiers. When a leader counsels someone, they help develop a common understanding of a situation. This common understanding of an environment is essential to "develop(ing) a shared understanding" concept in mission command doctrine.[15] Sensegiving is explaining complex environmental stimuli in a way that generates a shared understanding of an environment between one or more people. It is easy to see how sensegiving is an important process in the development of a Soldier, and why there are several ways that a leader can engage in sensegiving, good old-fashioned counseling is one of them.

Sensemaking and Sensegiving (Counseling in Action)

> *To get a better idea of how sensemaking and sensegiving work, consider this simple example. As a young Sergeant, I (Robert) had the privilege of being assigned a brand new private (we'll call him Private X for this story). Private X was a motivated young Soldier who joined the Army to earn money for cleege and to make a better life for himself. Up until he had met me, Private X had displayed the character traits of a good soldier. He was the Platoon Guide and Honor Graduate from Basic Combat Training (BCT), he scored upwards of 290-300 on each of his fitness tests (For soldiers who only know the ACFT and the 600-point scale, the old scale capped at 300), was in the top of his class in AIT, and had already*

enrolled in classes at the local college (there was no online college in those days).

When he arrived at his first unit, Private X saw the Army through the eyes of someone who had just completed basic and AIT. That is, he saw everything in black and white and assumed that everyone else did as well. During our initial counseling session, he told me that he could not believe his roommate did not want to enroll in college with him and had no desire to improve his fitness score. To him, he could not understand why I was not upset at his roommate for being lazy, because soldiers were not lazy, period. As he interacted with other members of the platoon and encountered a few other soldiers who he deemed unmotivated, he started making disparaging comments, getting in fights, and acting like he was better than everyone else. It was clear that Private X was going down the wrong road and was in desperate need of some sense giving, a.k.a. counseling.

My approach in dealing with Private X involved an extremely long counseling session. I had to make sure he would be able to change his perspective enough to become a valuable member of a team and not just be concerned with being the best Soldier on it. To do this, I explained why each of the other team members had joined the Army and tried to get him to see that anyone who was willing to join the Army and put their life on the line was deserving of respect even if they did not want to go to college or become more fit. I explained how the direct approach that his drill sergeants used would not work outside of a training environment, and that leaders had to find better ways to motivate people than just yelling at them. After about a two-hour discussion, Private X seemed to be getting it, and became apologetic for his behavior, and promised to do his best to help the team.

After the session with Private X, I was proud of myself for being such a patient leader and for using counseling as an effective sensegiving tool. All was well with the world, except, it wasn't. The next month Private X threw a hammer at our Operations Sergeant Major because he thought he was stealing a piece of wood. So, I counseled him again and was far more stern in my approach. I did not recommend Private X for an article-15 because the Sergeant Major really did steal

the piece of wood (too long of a story to explain here), but I spent enough time with Private X to ensure he understood that one does not throw hammers at the Sergeant Major for any reason.

Whew…counseling is hard, but it worked. I'm glad I paid attention when I attended the Primary Leadership Development Course (what the Basic Leader Course was called before the advent of the internet and when MTV still played music). Private X had a new attitude, and I knew he was going to be a great member of the team…except he wasn't. Within a week of the hammer incident, Private X attempted to assault another member of the platoon with a 2x4 because he thought the other Soldier was being lazy. The other Soldier was in fact being lazy, but that was my job to fix, not his. Again, Private X was out of line, and I had to counsel him. My patience was wearing thin, but he was such a good Soldier in all other areas, that I felt if I could just get through to him, and get him to change his sensemaking processes, he would have a bright future. So, I employed sensegiving again. I realized that the issue was that Private X was angry because of his life before the Army. He liked the Army, but the only tool he possessed for dealing with something that did not make sense was violence. It was how he was raised, and in his situational understanding, where Basic Combat Training and popular media's representation of the military (think Full Metal Jacket) reinforced blind aggression, it was the best tool for any situation. I got to the root of the issue, and I refocused my efforts on Private X's sensemaking abilities along with some constructive suggestions for how to deal with anger without violence. Man, I was a great counselor, it took some effort, but I solved the problem. I felt like I was ready to compete for the NCO of the Year.

The next month I made the schedule for our aid station operations and posted it on the platoon bulletin board (wall mounted cork board, used for messages prior to cell phones). Private X had the most duty days, mainly because I wanted to keep an eye on him, and I felt he needed a little more work for his behavior over the last month. Private X disagreed and let me know about his disagreement by drawing satanic symbols all over the schedule. He then took a picture that he drew for the platoon T-shirt (he was artistic), tore it up and threw

it in the trash. The rest of the platoon was starting to get a little freaked out, and my patience was almost exhausted. I felt I had one more attempt to reach Private X before I had to recommend him for punishment under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

I spent the next few hours counseling Private X about his response to things he didn't like. The way Private X made sense of the situation resulted in him believing he was being picked on because he had the most duty days. All he really wanted was some attention and consideration, as he did not believe I knew how hard he was working. Once I explained how I made the schedule and he realized he was being considered, Private X apologized for his behavior and produced the drawing he had made for the platoon t-shirt (he had not destroyed it after all). I think this is the first time Private X actually understood that it was his sensemaking that was causing the problem, and that I had been extremely patient with him.

That was the last issue I had with Private X. From that day forward, he seemed to see things differently, and his actions ceased to be angry and violent in nature. Counseling had been an effective sensegiving tool that took time but did change the way Private X looked at the world. I know this for sure, because Private X was me as a young Specialist. To this day I do not know how my Platoon Sergeant, SSG Mark Reichelderfer kept his patience with me, but he did, and I am far better for it, and if in the event he happens to read this…thank you!

Effective Praise and Motivating the Elephant

As covered earlier, there are two primary times when leaders will be found counseling soldiers. Either the counseling is spaced out as performance-based counseling and it is conducted on whatever fixed schedule the unit requires (once a month, once a quarter, or more commonly–once in a blue moon), or it is conducted immediately following a negative event. Leaders could counsel much more than this, but few do.

Generally, the negative event-oriented counseling is detailed, with descriptions of the wrongdoings, and explanations on why the action does not meet the leaders' expectations. It normally ends with some level of threat on how the action will not be tolerated and how continuing to act in such a way could lead to nonjudicial punishment, UCMJ action, or even a discharge from service.

In my (Richard's) first unit in the Army (The Old Guard) I received a negative counseling statement for eating lunch during lunch time instead of re-edge-dressing my shoes (painting the edges of the soles shiny black) on my second day in the unit. The counseling session ended with my leader stating that my actions were a disgrace to the Army and further misconduct could result in UCMJ action or my dismissal from service. I don't remember what I had for lunch that day, but I will always remember that counseling statement and the leader who gave it to me, and not in a good way. But we learn great lessons from the good and the bad.

Negative counseling tends to be long, detailed, and carry with it a negative connotation. So how detailed is performance-based counseling? How do leaders find detail in the good and less damnation in the bad? To answer that, let's start with the good and using a lesson from our mandatory Master Resilience Training (MRT) training, the skill: Effective Praise.

Effective Praise is based on the work of Dr. Carol Dweck who studied the effects of different types of praise on students and how praise impacted their performance. Dr. Dweck asserts that the most effective type of praise is action focused and detailed. Dweck suggests there are two mindsets linked to intelligence and performance: fixed or growth. With the fixed mindset, there is a fixed level of how smart someone is and how much they can achieve based on a limited potential. Alternatively, the growth mindset states that through work and effort a person may improve their intelligence in a specific focus or improve their performance on certain tasks. This ability to improve is due to the ability for the brain to adjust to information it interprets as important.

Many teachers and leaders make the mistake of praising someone for being intelligent. The issue with this praise is that it supports a fixed mindset of praising someone for something they naturally have and gives no attention to the effort of the individual to improve that knowledge base. The same is common in the Army. Take a new Soldier who is a fast runner. Their leader might write in the counseling that they are a naturally fast runner, but they are paying compliments to the obvious without addressing any effort the Soldier put into developing that ability. What if before shipping off to basic training, an overweight, non-athletic recruit started walking every day, eating right, and then eventually running everywhere they went just to get in better shape for basic training? Stating an obvious trait as an inherent skill could demonstrate a lack of curiosity of the leader and be interpreted as a superficial assessment that lacks a depth of understanding.

When leaders do not consider the level of effort a Soldier puts into improving a skill, it can be psychologically damaging to just call them a "good shot" or "fast runner" as if they were blessed at birth to be naturally skilled. The hard work and effort should be what a leader praises, not necessarily the results. This focus on effort facilitates two strengthening objectives. First, it demonstrates to the subordinate that the leader recognizes and appreciates the level of work that went into the performance, or improvement thereof. Second, by praising the growth-mindset, the leader creates a path to make the Soldier understand that they can accomplish other tasks by using the same driven effort. This motivation mindset is incredibly important for helping the Soldier improve on tasks that are more challenging for them, or ones that are less enjoyable. This praise is incredibly important for appealing to both the mental and emotional sense of the Soldier.

In their book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, Chip and Dan Heath discuss why people sometimes cannot motivate themselves to put in the work they know is required to improve performance.[16] Using an analogy of the rider and the elephant, the rider is the person sitting on the elephant who thinks they are in charge. They use signals to tell the elephant where and when to go. For the most part, the elephant follows the rider's commands, so the rider sees himself as in charge. But what happens when the rider gives the elephant a command that the elephant doesn't want to follow? What if the rider orders the elephant to cross a river and the water is cold? What if the rider is part of Hannibal's forces invading Rome in 218 BC and the rider is ordering the elephant to charge a burning blockade? The elephant doesn't care that the rider needs to cross the river, or that Hannibal wants to conquer parts of what we now call Europe. All the elephant knows is that the rider is asking them to do something very uncomfortable. If that comfort level surpasses whatever level of discomfort the rider can inflict on the elephant, the elephant will refuse to listen to the rider, meaning that regardless of what the rider may think, the elephant is really in charge of the relationship.

Now extend this analogy by adding some perspective and value. The rider represents your logical sense. She or he recognizes what you want to accomplish and can look at the tasks ahead of you in a logical way. The elephant represents your emotional self. This unreasonable and stubborn beast is the part of your identity driven through positive and negative feelings (emotions) and stimulus. When rider and elephant are synched, you can hyperfocus your efforts and accomplish what you need to. When the

rider says that you should do something, but the elephant doesn't see the enjoyment in it, you get stuck without willpower.

> *I (Richard) experienced a good example of the elephant rider analogy just this morning. After eating too much during the holidays, I told myself that the best way to get back to my ideal weight would be to go out and run it off. However, this morning was cold. Very cold. Too cold for my elephant to want to go out and run. So, I didn't get out of my warm bed and now I have to make it up tomorrow with a much more vigorous workout (if I can get my inner beast to cooperate). Should I have gotten up and ran in the cold? Yes. Would the cold have killed me? No. Would I have felt better about myself today if I had gotten up and ran? Absolutely. So why didn't I do it? Because my bed was warm and my elephant was sleepy. To ensure that I don't fall into the same trap tomorrow, I decided to fool my elephant a little bit by what Heath and Heath, call shaping the path.[17] We shape the path when we take the motivation out of the hands of the rider and the elephant, and give them no choice but to move in the way we want them to move.*
>
> *How did I shape the path? I asked my wife to go running with me. She does not suffer a rider-and-elephant conflict when it comes to exercise. She loves to get out and run, weather and time be damned. This shapes the path because my elephant is afraid of my wife, and I know he'll cooperate tomorrow, else he will receive the wrath of a scorned supportive spouse. Just kidding, I love my wife, and I enjoy trying to be a good husband (She may read this book). Even when I am happy letting myself down, I refuse to let her down. While my mangey elephant will absolutely hate it tomorrow morning, my rider is going to drag my lazy elephant out of bed and run with my wife, knowing that not only will this make me feel better, but it will win me some favor with the one person I share my life with. Take that, elephant.*

So what do riders, elephants and paths have to do with counseling? First, people will respond better to emotional cues over logical ones. Discussing how a subordinate's efforts will create a more efficient unit never sounds as good as pointing out how a subordinate's efforts are highly appreciated and make them a valuable member of the team. The difference becomes immediately apparent: one points to the logic of efficiency, while the other demonstrates pride and appreciation of the individual's efforts.

Second, recognizing the level of effort someone puts into their tasks and reinforcing that action will most likely lead to the Soldier an internal desire to demonstrate that behavior. This only occurs if the praise is both genuine and detailed. What specifically did the Soldier do that created an overall positive impact? Was it their ability to communicate? Was it leading from the front and taking on the task? Was it their time management or creativity? Telling someone you appreciate them getting all of the unit's vehicles up and running in the motor pool is great, but pointing out that their ability to direct four squads and clearly communicate their commander's intent, while also ensuring that the lowest level soldiers received helpful guidance and are now capable of being a higher level of value than before the task, well, that sounds much better.

This method of promoting desired behavior through positive reinforcement, referred to as operant conditioning, allows junior leaders to recognize and complement desired behavior in detail, creating an environment that encourages your subordinates to continue enacting similar behaviors in the future.[18] The best way to conduct regular interval performance counseling is to focus on specific behaviors or actions and discuss how you recognize and appreciate the time and effort the Soldier put into completing it. Letting your subordinates feel good about their accomplishments is not a bad thing, just don't tell them they are the best it is not the truth. Feeling good about an accomplishment must be based on fact. When counseling to encourage the desired behavior, find reasons to focus and discuss the good. However, there is always the possibility of having to talk about the bad (and you should if needed). So, how do you have those kinds of conversations?

Difficult Conversations

No one enjoys initiating difficult conversations or pointing out the flaws of others. There is nothing fun about having to sit down and reminisce about poor decisions or performance, but sometimes, that is exactly what counseling requires. The Army is an organization that believes that there is always room for improvement and acknowledging where those instances exist strengthens and sharpens the skills of all involved. This means that our leaders should always be able to find something that their subordinates can do to improve their performance. I (Richard) remember being told as a private that if a leader did not find a gig in an in-ranks inspection, it meant that the team or squad leader was not looking hard enough. This does not mean that a leader needs to use an entire counseling session to point out the flaws of their soldiers and demean them when a flaw is identified. However, if the leader spends the entire counseling ses-

sion doing nothing but pointing out how perfect the Soldier is, no value is added either. The difficult trick is to find a balance of emphasis that leaves the Soldier motivated to not only keep performing well but improve their performance even more. Sadly, I have both witnessed and experienced counseling sessions where any good outcomes were completely glossed over, and the leader decided to focus only on what needed to be improved. To make matters worse, in some of these situations, the leader did all of the talking and only stopped to ask rhetorical questions to the subordinate like "What were you thinking?" or "Did you really think that was good enough?" This kind of "mentorship" does not create an environment that invites soldiers to make the military their career.

A leader cannot ignore undesired behavior or actions, but they shouldn't focus solely on them either. Understand that there are very few people in the world that think to I "I want to do this task as badly as possible" or "What can I do to get into trouble today?" Soldiers rarely go out looking to do the wrong thing and if they do, most of the time, it's because they witnessed someone else doing it first. I remember a Soldier getting in trouble for using their government credit card for personal purchases. The Company Commander threw the book at them. The sad part of it was that everyone in the Company knew that the former Company First Sergeant, that the same Company Commander loved, was notorious for using his government credit card for personal use all the time. In fact, he would brag about it. But thanks to his rank, he left to become promoted to Sergeant Major, while the Soldier who followed in his footsteps was demoted and eventually kicked out of the Army.

Way to be a role model there, Top.

The point is that soldiers do what they learn and sometimes it's bad behavior that does not coincide with Army values. It doesn't mean the soldiers get a pass for their actions. But I wonder how different that soldier's situation would have been if they had a leader who listened to understand, and not to just judge. When we notice soldiers doing something wrong, we do need to counsel, but the first thing we need to do is seek to understand what they were thinking and why they did what they did. Be curious, not judgmental. By seeking to understand first, we can determine if there are other factors that we need to know about. Is the Soldier in some kind of trouble? Are they being manipulated? Were they told by another leader to commit the act? If the first thing a NCO does do is admonish them before understanding them, the opportunity to build trust with our soldiers is lost. Understand them better and create a teachable moment. They still need to be held responsible for their actions. Depending on the severity, appropri-

ate recourse is required by Army rules, laws, and culture. However, just because a Soldier requires discipline, punishment, or corrective action, doesn't mean the corrective should be merciless. Let the counseling be the calm conversation, not the righteous damnation.

There will be counseling sessions where the soldier has done something bad enough where you are just annotating it prior to the Article-15 proceedings or even a court martial. During those times, try to remember that your Soldier is going through enough. You treating them with anything other than dignity and respect will only make things worse. Be professional and respectful during these difficult sessions and let them know that you still understand that their wellbeing is your responsibility and that you take it seriously. Doing so will not only make things run smoother but also have a cascading effect on others as they see how you handle the situation.

The complement sandwich and giving someone a good name

As mentioned before, it's always good to address how someone can improve during performance counseling, but it can take different forms in practice during daily interactions. Consider the scope of your soldier's performance. Hyper-focusing on the negatives instead of measuring the Soldier against their past performance is an easy routine and bad habit. It is easy to fall into the trap of measuring ourselves by our intent, and others by their outcomes. Start conversations by highlighting the good and then transitioning to areas that need improvement. For instance, if your Soldier is a hard worker, but doesn't do a great job listening to instructions, then begin with complementing their tenacity before moving into how they can improve. Saying something like "You are one of the hardest working members of this platoon and I appreciate how you always give it your all" would be a wonderful place to start before moving into "and with a little work on ensuring you fully understand the task before jumping into it, I bet you can even become more productive." Notice that we built on the complement and followed it with an "and" not a "but." Starting with a "but" can easily remove all of the good feelings and rapport built up with the complement. Notice how "You are one of the hardest working members of this platoon, BUT you need to work on fully understanding the task before jumping into it" doesn't sound anywhere near as positive.

The second tactic involves using a person's name, title, or position as a way of pushing for better performance. In the Army, we like to shorthand everything, and we love our nicknames. Most of my (Richard's) early years in the Army I was Private, High Speed, Joker, FNG, and a few

other, more colorful terms that can't be listed here. Even when I was doing everything right, I was still given names. One can argue that this was to toughen me up, and to a point I can agree with that, but there is a place and time for that, and counseling isn't one of them. Imagine you have a Specialist Team Leader who is not taking their job seriously. They enjoy joking with the other soldiers and rarely take their role as a leader seriously. You must address it in counseling. How do you do it? One approach could be "Listen, I know you're just a Specialist, but I need you to start taking your job seriously. The other soldiers like you but you need to be their leader." Ok, not bad, but I think we can improve a lot with a few carefully selected words, and by giving them a better name. How about "You know Specialist Smith, it's great that you care so much about your soldiers. I know you came up in the ranks with them and being their Team Leader is a difficult transition. You are the Team Leader now. Your performance as a Soldier was exceptional and now with your new leadership position, you are in the perfect place to help your soldiers learn to be as good as you were and someday be leaders themselves. But I know that you are the perfect person for the job, and I just want you to know that I am here to help you with whatever you need to make your team the best in the Army." It's not quick correction, and it requires some planning, so you have this language in your back pocket when needed. The point is to remind them of their responsibility in a way that doesn't look like immense criticism. This will not always be an option, but with a little practice and preparation, you would be amazed at how often you can use this method to get the best out of someone.

Challenges with Counseling

One of the difficulties in counseling soldiers is that not all soldiers are open or responsive to feedback. Imagine taking the time to set up a meaningful counseling session, just to have your Soldier come in, slouch in their seat, and not engage in conversation at all. While this may be an expectation when it comes to corrective counseling, the sad truth is that some of our soldiers are so desensitized to counseling being anything more than a lackluster tongue lashing that they go into any counseling session with their defenses heightened. Some soldiers have learned to be cynical of leaders who promise to care and mentor if given the chance, so they may be unresponsive to counseling at first.

Another issue an NCO might encounter is when a Soldier either plays the victim or explains away any critique or corrections a counselor may give during the session. Accountability is not a characteristic all soldiers share, so there is always a chance that a Soldier may be engaged up until

they are given even the slightest amount of critique, at which point become their own defense lawyer when it was never necessary. These soldiers will elaborate how it was someone else's fault that they failed in some way. When this occurs it's important to step back and meet them where they are in their own internal development. Learning to take constructive criticism takes place through practice. The Johari Window, discussed earlier, presents an opportunity to make transparent the aspects this defensive soldier may not understand about themself.

Not all counseling sessions are disengaged or hyper-defensive. In fact, most counseling can be a very positive experience if the counselor goes the extra mile to create a meaningful session. One way to try and ensure that counseling sessions are positive is to prepare correctly. Let the Soldier know that you need to counsel them and work on a good time to do it. Give them an expectation of what you will be discussing and ask them to prepare any points or questions for the conversation that they would like to discuss. Remember, counseling is a two-way conversation, but if only one person knows that the conversation is going to happen, it doesn't allow the other person to prepare for it and bring value to the discussion. I (Richard) remember a performance counseling I received from a Platoon Leader once. This individual was giving me counseling on how he saw my NCOER looking and what I could do to improve it. The only issue was that he never told me that we were going to have this conversation. Also, he had never counseled me before in the year and a half that we had both been in the platoon. I didn't even know that we were conducting a "counseling session" until he pulled out a counseling form for me to sign (this was before the NCOER Support form). If I had not had to spend half the session wondering what the heck we were talking about, maybe I would have gotten more out of it. Instead, my recollections are focused on being blind-sided for a conversation I would have been happily prepared for had I known ahead of time.

Experiences on the Receiving End of the Counseling Process

Over my (Robert's) 30-year Army career, and the two additional years spent as an Army civilian employee, I have had varied experience with counseling. Outside of the example I provided above about Private X (only one of which was written down by the way), I can count the number of times that I have been physically and formally counseled in the developmental or event-oriented (good or bad) fashion on two hands in the last 32 years. That's about one official counseling session for every three years of service. As I reflect on this, I'm disappointed because it really means that my leaders did not make the time for some doctrinally required offi-

cial counseling. Worse yet, my summative counseling and the evaluations were mostly written by myself until I became a Sergeant Major. At the same time, I recall my bosses ensuring that I took the time to counsel and correctly rate those for whom I was responsible. I have always had the unhealthy predisposition that counseling was super important, but it was also the tool of hypocrisy in which I always put forth the effort for my subordinates, and almost never had it reciprocated by my superiors. In a few cases, I did not find out that my boss was unhappy with me until it was time for my evaluation. I do not think I am alone in this experience and believe the majority of readers will say "ya…me too," as they read this paragraph. I have often reflected on this and have spent countless hours considering the variables that have led to my personal experiences in being counseled. Here are my best thoughts to explain this phenomenon.

It is not a people problem that leads to a lack of counseling in the Army, but rather a system problem. In my early years of service, it was easy for me to see the problem with the system as it relates to counseling. The main issue with counseling was (and is) the required documentation. The first issue was that there were a limited number of computers in each company. I remember a time when my entire company had three computers. While most counseling was documented by hand, it took leaders an exorbitant amount of time, especially if they struggled with writing and spelling to produce documents that did not make them sound uneducated. Secondly, we were seldom all together in a garrison environment. Being part of the sustainment war-fighting function required constant support to maneuver elements that always keep a portion of my platoon/company geographically separated from each other.

Time was (and is) another limiting factor. For good counseling to happen, a leader needs at least 30-60 minutes per Soldier. A cursory examination of your training schedule most likely reveals no room for a five-to-ten-hour slot where a leader can prepare for, conduct, document, and follow up on counseling within the duty day. As a platoon sergeant, I would not let my squad leaders leave for the day if on the last day of the month every Soldier was not counseled. When this happened, I would stay at work with them until the counseling was complete. This also required that several soldiers stay to receive the counseling. This caused two problems. First, it happened every month. Second, the quality of the counseling sessions was not great. Looking back on this, it was not that my squad leaders didn't value counseling or want to do a good job; I was not providing them the time to do it. The lack of time coupled with only a few computers, and no one wanting to seem dumb by making mistakes

on handwritten documentation, it is really no surprise that counseling always took the back seat to other tasks.

While more resources exist, counseling is still not being completed as doctrine says it should be. The time required to perform this task in a manner that meets the spirit of intent behind it is often not prioritized to allow success. The counseling process is still too cumbersome, and it rarely produces quick results. If that's the intent behind the counseling, a quick result, then there should be a streamlined authority-granting process to eliminate unnecessary courses that slog down the mission. A system that is not deliberate and methodical, but does not produce quick results, should be recognized as such and implemented when the time, resources, and priorities can facilitate small and incremental professional development through counseling.

Higher levels of counseling occur more than I personally experienced, it is just not documented, which is why many people feel it is not happening. Thus, my humble suggestion to fix this issue is for the Army to develop solutions that allow on-the-job generation of an electronic counseling file via a mobile device. If developed securely, this could simplify the documentation process and encourage the completion of counseling. This software could have pre-populated DA 4856's (Army counseling form) for certain events, both positive and negative, and it could have a voice-to-text option to speed the creation of the forms. There could even be a feature that records counseling sessions and provides a transcript to be used as an addendum to the DA. Another mantra of improvement science is that "your understanding of a system is probably wrong, and definitely incomplete." The Army will continue to struggle with counseling until the system is reviewed, revised, and repaired. Feedback, in the form of coaching, mentoring, or counseling remains one of the best tools we have to develop soldiers, and thus, while it may be difficult to adjust the system, as pointed out earlier in this chapter, it is well worth the effort.

Questions for Discussion

- **Coaching for Everyone**

  Reflect on a time when you coached (or were coached by) a highly competent soldier. How did the voluntary, supportive, and subordinate-led nature of coaching differ from typical directive counseling? What made it effective (or what prevented it from being more impactful)?

- **The Johari Window**

  Using the Johari Window framework from ATP 6-22.1, think of a soldier you lead (or yourself in the past). Identify one potential "blind spot" (something others see but the individual does not). How could a well-prepared coaching session help enlarge the open area and shrink the blind spot? What questions would you ask to facilitate that discovery without damaging trust?

- **Mentoring**

  Share an experience where you were mentored (or mentored someone) across rank or positional differences. What elements, trust, time, realistic expectations, or a written agreement, made the relationship successful, and what challenges arose when those elements were missing?

- **The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy**

  How can NCOs intentionally use developmental counseling to foster a growth mindset rather than a fixed one in their soldiers?

- **Sensegiving and Counseling**

  Think of a soldier whose behavior seemed "out of character" or aggressive. How could sensegiving, rather than immediate punishment, help reframe their understanding of the Army environment and reduce destructive reactions?

- **Effective Praise**

  How does emphasizing effort over talent motivate soldiers on harder or less enjoyable tasks, and why is it more powerful than generic compliments?

- **Shaping the Path**

  How can NCOs "shape the path" during counseling or daily leadership to make positive change easier for the emotional side of a soldier (e.g., fear of failure, discomfort with new tasks, or lack of motivation)? Provide one practical example from your unit.

- **Difficult Conversations**

  Role-play or describe how you would counsel a Specialist Team Leader who jokes too much and avoids leadership responsibility, using the "good name" technique to reframe their identity and expectations.

- **Complements and Feedback**

  When have you received (or given) counseling that felt like a "praise, criticism, praise" formula? Did it build motivation or come across as manipulative? How can leaders make the structure authentic and effective?

Recommended Further Reading

ATP 6-22.1, *Providing Feedback.*

"Counseling-Coaching-Mentoring: Understanding Counseling and Human Needs," by Chris Raynor, *The NCO Journal*, 25 September 2017.

"Sponsorship, Integration Counseling, and Mentorship: We Have to Do Better," by Sgt. 1st Class Michael R. Holguin, *The NCO Journal*, February 2026.

Endnotes

1. Devi M R, Renuka et al. “The Effect of Counselling on the Academic Performance of College Students.” *Journal of clinical and diagnostic research: JCDR* vol. 7,6 (2013): 1086-8.

2. Department of the Army, ATP 6-22.1, *Providing Feedback: Counseling–Coaching–Mentoring* (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2024).

3. Vince Lombardi, *What It Takes to Be Number One: Vince Lombardi on Leadership* (McGraw-Hill, 2006).

4. DA. ATP 6-22.1, 32.

5. DA. ATP 6-22.1, 35.

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9. DA. ATP 6-22.1, 19-22.

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12. Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* Edited by R. J. Tarrant, (Oxford University Press, 2004).

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16. Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard* (New York, Broadway Books, 2010).

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Chapter 8

Trust and Communication: The Hardest Things We Do in The Army

In a previous chapter, we mentioned that giving trust was one of the hardest things to do in the Army. While giving trust is indeed a challenge for many leaders, effective communication is a struggle for all leaders. While this may be anecdotal, every command climate survey that we have seen consistently identified communication as a problem in the unit. Consequently, every commander we have ever worked with has listed "effective communication" as one of their top leadership priorities. We have seen "effective communication" listed as a directive in published command guidance, as part of written leadership philosophies, embedded within unit vision and mission statements, and listed in various command policies. Army leaders tend to always place a high value on communication. Yet, communication is always a problem.

To understand why effective communication is so difficult to establish and then maintain, let us first explain effective communication as defined by Army doctrine. ADP 6-22, *Leadership and the Profession* describes "communicates" as one of the five competencies of leadership and dedicates three pages to the topic with suggestions on how to communicate effectively with one's soldiers.[1] As doctrinal communication is discussed below, think of how communication is occurring in your unit and see how many of the characteristics of effective communication the people around you display. "Competent leadership requires good communication."[2]

ADP 6-22 dissects the competency of communication into four equally important techniques: listens actively, creates a shared understanding, employs engaging communication techniques, and is sensitive to cultural factors in communication.[3] ADP 6-22 explains that communication is more than a transfer of information, but a process that builds meaning and helps construct a shared understanding of the situation. Nothing discussed in chapter six is possible without effective communication. It is a key component of counseling. ADP 6-22 dissects the competency of communication into four equally important techniques: listens actively, creates a shared understanding, employs engaging communication techniques, and is sensitive to cultural factors in communication.[4]

No matter how well you think you communicate, you can always get better. Most people do not acknowledge their blind spot regarding communication. One of the reasons communications often goes awry is because

Leaders communicate effectively by clearly expressing ideas and actively listening to others. By understanding the nature and importance of communication and practicing effective communication techniques, leaders will relate better to others and be able to translate goals into actions. Followers share information candidly. Communication is essential to all other leadership competencies.	
Listens actively	• Listens and watches attentively. • Makes appropriate notes. • Tunes in to content, emotion, and urgency. • Uses verbal and nonverbal means to inform the speaker that they are paying attention. • Reflects on new information before expressing views.
Creates shared understanding	• Shares necessary information with others and subordinates. • Protects confidential information. • Coordinates plans with higher, lower, and adjacent organizations. • Keeps higher and lower headquarters, superiors, and subordinates informed. • Expresses thoughts and ideas clearly to individuals and groups. • Recognizes potential miscommunication and takes corrective action. • Uses appropriate means for communicating a message.
Employs engaging communication techniques	• States goals to energize others to adopt and act on them. • Uses logic and relevant facts in dialogue; expresses well-organized ideas. • Speaks enthusiastically and maintains listeners' interest and involvement. • Makes appropriate eye contact when speaking. • Uses appropriate gestures. • Uses visual aids as needed. • Determines, recognizes, and resolves misunderstandings.
Is sensitive to cultural factors in communication	• Maintains awareness of communication customs, expressions, actions, or behaviors. • Demonstrates respect for others.

Figure 8.1. Communication. Department of the Army. ADP 6-22: Leadership and the Profession. Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2019. Pg. 5-16.

everyone thinks they are great at it. The problem lies with other people not being good listeners. Communication is a two way street, and good communication is determined through the eye of the beholder. The most important aspect of communication, and the first technique ADP 6-22 addresses, is listening. The second option reads more naturally and fits the tone of the rest of your writing.

Active Listening

"Listens actively," or more commonly known as, "active listening," is the first component of effective communication. This is where communication often goes awry. This is because, as Dr. Stephen Covey explains in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, people tend to listen in order to respond rather than to understand. Covey's work on leadership and effectiveness reinforces a simple truth: most communication breaks down not because people fail to speak clearly, but because they fail to truly listen.[5] We are sure you have experienced this as well. Think of how many times you tried to communicate a message to another person, and they gave an answer before you finished answering the question.

An example of this concept happened to me (Robert) recently when I went to pick up my registration for my car from a dealership. Since I was transferring my plates, I only needed the registration, not the registration and the plates. I explained this to the receptionist as I entered the dealership. At which point she went to look for my registration and license plate. She returned, stating that what I asked for was not in her file. I then showed her my text from the secretary informing me that I needed to come to the dealership to pick up my registration. She now had been given a verbal request and seen a written message regarding my registration. She went to look again, and yet again returned empty handed.

The receptionist insisted that my registration was not ready and was about to ask me to leave and come back when a manager of sorts intervened and asked me for my phone number. He then checked their records to make sure my name was correct in their system. According to the manager, my name was correct, and my registration was ready for pick-up. The receptionist then stated that he should check the file cabinet, because she had looked through every plate package and mine was not in it. I spoke up again and said, I do not need plates, I am only here for the registration. At which point, she went to a different file cabinet and retrieved my registration. The receptionist was so used to people coming in for their plates and registration that she had not bothered to listen to me when I informed her that I only needed my registration. Worse yet, it turns out that she didn't bother to read the text I showed her on the topic. While this was not that big of a deal, and it only cost me 15 minutes of time, this sort of thing happens all of the time, and can have disastrous consequences in a military setting.

ADP 6-22 lists the following behaviors that people engage in when they actively listen: listens and watches attentively, makes appropriate notes, turns content into emotion and energy, uses verbal and nonverbal means to inform the speaker they are paying attention, and reflects on new information before expressing views.[6] Rarely do supervisors exhibit all of these actions, especially at the same time. The reason for this, for us, and we assume for others, is that active listening is hard work, and it takes decisively more time to engage in it than traditional listening to respond. NCOs ought to always aim to do better in active listening. Active listening and effective communication are like paratroopers and parachutes, it's hard to have one without the other.

I (Richard) have always found listening to understand to be one of the most challenging things to do. As NCOs we are trained to have an answer for every problem. The faster we start moving, the quicker tasks get done

and problems get solved. This means that we have been groomed to try and achieve the most action with the least amount of information, and this conditioning seeps into our professional communication as well. If a peer or subordinate is telling me about a problem, my mind is racing on ways to help them or fix the problem. I want to either share a similar experience to demonstrate empathy or give them advice at once. The issue with this is twofold. First, it can leave the other member of the conversation feeling like they are rushed or are wasting your time. Second, you may not fully understand the situation yet, meaning your advice may not be addressing the problem. If you are thinking of a time when you may have rushed to respond instead of listening to understand right now, don't feel too bad. We all struggle with it.

Outside of what ADP 6-22 provides regarding active listening, there are a plethora of additional benefits from the practice. By practicing active listening, a leader can improve on these skills, and over time will become a more effective communicator. Taking the time to engage in active listening requires empathy, listening skills, clarity of conversation, good non-verbal communication (give the person you are listening to your undivided attention), being personable, and respect.[7] Therefore, by practicing active listening, a leader can improve on these skills, and over time will become a more effective communicator. Becoming better at these skills will help one to become a better leader as well.

In addition to improving communication, active listening makes people feel good because they feel heard. The research on this is conclusive. Active listening significantly impacts the brain's neural pathways in ways that lead to improved relationships, increased productivity, and that elusive target, effective communication.[8] Active listening makes people feel heard, opening the communication channels between the soldiers and supervisor. This improved channel leads to more honest communication and evokes conversational curiosity (it is hard to engage in a meaningful conversation without asking why one feels, thinks, or is acting a certain way). When this happens, neurons in our brains that control relationships become stimulated, which means we start to "like" the person we are communicating with, and begin to build a relationship with them. Thus, active listening can move us from relational poverty to relational wealth, which is a good thing for everyone.

The drawback of active listening is that it takes time to do it well, thus leaders must be strategic about who they engage in active listening. No leader on the planet can practice active listening with every person with whom they communicate. However, every person on the planet can en-

gage in active listening. Active listening can improve the communication and interpersonal-relational landscape of the world. Psychiatrist and neuroscientist Dr. Bruce Perry argues, "If we moved from a state of relational poverty to relational wealth,meaning we had more relational interaction, and thus a more regulated population—we'd have access to millions more units of cognitive power. There would be a quantum leap in creativity and invention. It would revolutionize the planet."[9] Revolutionizing the planet is a pretty powerful outcome from just a little active listening. Imagine what it could do for communication in your counseling sessions or within your unit?

A Shared Understanding

Creating a shared understanding is one of the principles of mission command.[10] Shared understanding enables disciplined initiative, which builds trust between leaders and subordinates. If leaders cannot create a shared understanding of the commander's intent (or anything really), it is unlikely that a subordinate will be able to take the correct action in the absence of orders, which can lead to undesirable outcomes. Initiative outside of the commander's intent is not disciplined. Creating a shared understanding is critical to mission success and for communication to be effective. This same concept is true of any situation one might encounter both inside and outside of the military.

In order to create a shared understanding, ADP 6-22 states that leaders should share necessary information with others and subordinates, protect confidential information, coordinate plans with "higher," "lower," and adjacent organizations, keep higher headquarters, superiors and subordinates informed, express thoughts and ideas clearly in groups, recognize potential miscommunication and take corrective action, and use the appropriate means for communicating a message. Like active listening, creating a shared understanding is difficult to do effectively, and time and effort. Getting two people to see things from their own perspective (which everyone does) and yet understand that perspective in the same way as everyone else is extremely challenging.

One of the reasons that creating a shared understanding is so difficult can be explained by Illocutionary Speech Theory. In 1962 John Austin's book *How to Do Things with Words* was published by Harvard University Press. In his book, Austin explains how language can function not just to describe reality but to perform actions. He categorizes speech acts into three components: locutionary (the act of saying something with meaning), illocutionary (the intended action performed through the statement, such

as promising or ordering), and perlocutionary (the effect of the statement on the listener). Central to his theory is the illocutionary act, which reflects the speaker's intention and the social conventions that make speech acts effective. For example, saying "I apologize" in an appropriate context constitutes the act of apologizing. Austin emphasizes that illocutionary acts rely on contextual conditions, such as the speaker's authority and situational appropriateness, for their success.[11] His work laid the foundation for later developments in pragmatics and speech act theory, and in our minds offers an explanation for the difficulty that surrounds communication.

Illocutionary Speech Theory may sound complicated, but in fact it is fairly simple. Words mean different things to different people in different contexts. For example, when we hear a word, we do not interpret it as its' literal meaning as described in a dictionary, but rather what we have come to associate that word with based on the context that it occurs in, the situational power of the person saying the word and the non-verbal communication that accompanies the word. For example, if a boss were to say "Oh…I'm sorry to trouble you" in a sarcastic tone with their arms crossed while at work, we do not believe anyone would believe the boss was apologizing. However, interpreting what the boss actually meant would be based on a myriad of additional factors, many of which the boss would not be privy to. Thus, the boss might be making a joke, but one employee may take it as an insult, yet another may interpret it as an actual apology. This intersubjectivity of meaning is the enemy of developing a shared understanding and smites effective communication in the same fashion and regularity as an Army medic dispenses Motrin.

In his book *Leadership is Language: The Hidden Power of What You Say and What You Don't*, David Marquet explains how positional power differences deeply affect the meaning associated with words. In his book, Marquet recounts the sinking of a ship in which the captain had created an environment in which people were scared to tell him the truth about the severity of an approaching storm. Spoiler alert: the ship sinks, and everyone dies because they believed the captain would think them to be weak and insubordinate if they brought him information they believed he wouldn't agree with. They thought this despite the order the captain gave when he asked the crew to wake him if there was something they could not handle.[12] We can recount a multitude of disastrous incidents that have occurred because of the illocutionary force associated with a speech act. While most miscommunications do not result in huge disasters, they can still wreak havoc within your formation. A shared understanding is truly a difficult task to achieve, but it is so crucial to communication and the

accomplishment of a mission that it is well worth the extra effort it takes to create it.

It is important to note that you and your soldiers do not necessarily have to know or understand Illocutionary Speech Theory to create a shared understanding, but it can help. Creating a shared understanding is a very difficult task. Active listening plays a large role in creating a shared understanding. If you think you may have created shared understanding, but you are not sure, ask your Soldiers to back brief you. Did they fully understand what you told them? Did they understand the reason behind the explanation you gave them? Are you assuming they know how to do something they don't or that they know they are the one you are asking to do the task? Many times, the greatest enemy to shared understanding is the incorrect assumption that it exists. As leaders, you can easily believe that clear and concise instructions were provided, complete with a motivating speech on the importance of prompt and quality work. Going back to check on how things worked out, however, it's possible to find that the work was either not completed or it was completed incorrectly. Hindsight is always 20/20, but if you took the time to ask more than "Do you understand?"you are far more likely to uncover confusion before it turns into failure. A way to look at how the two work together is to picture that Active listening is one of the primary actions a leader can take that creates a shared understanding. The other is engaging in a variety of communication techniques.

Engaging Communication Techniques

While scholars tend to disagree about the exact amount of communication is nonverbal, they do agree that most communication is nonverbal.[13] Nonverbal communication ranges from hand gestures or facial expressions, to making eye contact with the person while talking to them. Unfortunately, nonverbal communication is subjective to the person receiving it and can lead to miscommunication. According to psychologists Miles Patterson, Alan Friedlund, and Carlos Crivelli, there are four misconceptions about nonverbal communication that lead to poor communication. These misconceptions are "that people communicate using decodable body language; that they have a stable personal space by which they regulate contact with others; that they express emotion using universal, evolved, iconic, categorical facial expressions; and that they can deceive and detect deception, using dependable telltale clues."[14] How many of these misconceptions do you believe?

I (Robert) have been and still am frequently a victim of my facial expressions communicating a different message than I intend. I am from Gaelic descent, and tend to be stoic in my expressions, thus people think

I am a little angry when I am speaking. In reality, I am not angry, I just don't have a lot of facial expressions. It gets worse when I try to adjust my facial expressions to match a more categorical expectation (eg. smiling to display happiness), I tend to come across as inauthentic, which indicates that I am lying. To get ahead of this issue, I always tell new soldiers or students, that "this is my happy face, just because I have a slight frown, I am not unhappy with you. If you think I am, ask me, and please believe the words I tell you." I have had people tell me that they were relieved when I told them this, because they really did think I was an angry person.

In addition to thinking actively about one's nonverbal communication, ADP 6-22 also explains that leaders need to overtly state goals to energize others to adopt and act on them, use logic and relevant facts in dialogue, speak enthusiastically to maintain listeners' interest and involvement, use visual aids as needed, determine, recognize, and look for and resolve misunderstandings.[15] With all of these things to think about, it is no wonder that communication can become muddled, as people tend to attempt to communicate quickly without giving thought to any of the aforementioned tasks. Enabling great communication takes a lot of deliberate effort to understand the way you communicate and how your soldier's best communication and is much harder to do well than one thinks.

Nonverbal communication is often overlooked or explained away. I (Richard) have had many NCO leaders that have looked angry and have brushed it off by saying "That's just me. I have an angry resting face" as if this makes it ok. These leaders tend to be the same ones that receive negative comments on command climate surveys and then exclaim "If people had a problem with me or how I do things, then why didn't they just muster the courage to come tell me face to face?" The irony is that they never see that when you appear to be unapproachable, then people don't approach you with what you need to know.

If you recall from a page ago my (Richard's) comments on non-verbal facial expressions directly contradict those of my friend and co-author (Rob). So how can that be so? This contradiction demonstrates how even when we are self-aware, we may not fully understand how others view us. I personally do not think that Rob's face looks angry, but I could see how others might. However, I will say that in most instances, his first interaction with someone will demonstrate an attitude that isn't angry or cold by any means. His warm personality and desire to understand situations show through his conversations and vocal tone. The lesson: If you happen to be of Gaelic decent and have what some call "resting angry face", you may need to work extra hard in your words and actions to demonstrate

the proper range of emotions that your lack of facial expressions fails to deliver. That is why verbal communication is so important.

Verbal communication has two basic parts; what you say, and how you say it. It is important to think about if you are truly delivering the message you intend to and in the way you intend to do it. Were you clear in stating your point, or did you lose the narrative and confuse your audience? Did you pay as much attention to what you were saying as you hoped the receiver of the communication did? We can both think of people who either did not fully understand a set of instructions themselves, so they did not communicate them well, or a situation in which someone had to have a difficult discussion about a soldier's shortfalls (see the counseling chapter from earlier) and they spent so much time avoiding addressing something crucial that they never were able to get to the point and address the poor conduct. I (Richard) remember a particular Sergeant Major who always had his nose buried in his phone. He would have, what he considered, full conversations with soldiers while spending the entire time distracted and inattentive. While this is already a taboo behavior for active listening and nonverbal communication, his verbal communication was terrible as well. While I suffer from technology addiction as much as everyone else, after watching this leader and their behavior, I do my best to never be looking at a screen while conversing with someone. Establishing communication boundaries and a precedent for your subordinates to follow will foster an esprit de corps that remains committed to listening before acting.

Sensitivity toward Cultural Factors

Another task that ADP 6-22 lists for leaders seeking to be good communicators is to remain sensitive to cultural factors. To do this, leaders must maintain awareness of communication customs, expressions, actions, or behaviors and demonstrate respect for others.[16]

> *I (Robert) fell victim to not paying attention to cultural factors when I was deployed to Kuwait in 2016. This is embarrassing to admit, but one time, as I was going through an entry checkpoint at a Kuwaiti military base, I engaged in a short conversation with one of the guards. To my ear, everything sounded fine, but once we passed through the gate, my commander asked me why I made fun of the guard's accent right to his face. I was taken back, and insisted that I would never do such a thing. However, as my boss continued, he explained that I slipped into a middle eastern accent when I was speaking with the guard, and the guard's nonverbal communication*

suggested that he believed that I was making fun of the way he spoke. When we left the base, I attempted to find the guard to apologize, but he had already left. While I did not do this on purpose, I was not paying attention to the way I was communicating, and I had inadvertently hurt someone's feelings. Not a good look for the CSM.

Another example of being sensitive to cultural factors comes from one of the small missions I conducted in Bangladesh in 2008. I was on a small surgical team, and we had deployed our operating equipment to Bangladesh as part of a cooperative agreement designed to build goodwill. On the first night of the mission, my team had finished setting up the operating room and had conducted all of the necessary preoperative examinations for the next day. It was around 2000 hours, and we had just finished eating dinner with several of the Bangladeshi officers. Following our meal the one of the Bangladeshi colonels invited us to walk around the camp. As we started walking, the colonel reached down and grabbed my hand and held on to it. We walked for about an hour holding hands.

My white and male lived experience as an American might not have been prepared me or made me willing to accept the common cultural practice. However, because I was aware of the local culture, I knew that the Bangladeshis viewed holding hands as a sign of great friendship. Thus, I kept holding hands with the colonel although it weirded me out a little. In doing this, I was able to communicate friendship between the US and Bangladesh via cultural means. Had I jerked my hands away or tried to explain that men don't hold hands where I come from, I am sure I would have hurt his feelings, and generated a little ill-will, which would have been the opposite of why we were there. Thus, the best way to keep culture at the forefront of communication is to follow the age-old mantra… when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Always be aware of the cultures around you and adjust your norms to theirs.

Communication Mediums

Another, and often overlooked aspect of communication is the medium one chooses as a vector. In biology, a vector is something that carries a disease, in math it is a direction of magnitude, and in physics it is used to

describe quantities that cannot be represented by a single number…all of this sounds eerily related to communication. The terms vector and medium are used interchangeably to describe the vehicle in which the message is transported from one person to another. While some leaders may not put much thought into choosing the right vector, we attest that it is critically important, as the priority of the message must match the capability of the medium. If you don't believe that, try sending a letter to the fire department if your house catches on fire.

There is a direct relationship between the importance of a message and the medium used to transmit it. If something is urgent and important, face-to-face communication is best. If the message is urgent but not as important, a phone call will usually work. If something is important but not urgent a text or social media message are good choices. If something is not urgent and not important…why bother communicating it at all? But, if you feel the need to communicate something that is not urgent or important, a letter (a message written on paper that was used before the advent of the internet) will suffice.

While one might laugh a little at our explanation of vectors and mediums, I (Robert) have personally seen this go wrong, and detract from communication happening. As a CSM, I once had to have a serious talk with one of my first sergeants because he thought sending a text at 2200 was a great way to communicate a location change for the next day's formation. Sending a text, like an e-mail, does not mean that communication has happened. Thus, if you must use texts or emails to communicate something, ensure that you ask for a response to your message. This will ensure that the receiver has at least read the message.

Communicating With Your Boss

There will be time in which you will be the boss. However, as most of you know, bosses also have bosses. You will always have a boss, so it is best to make sure you communicate with them in the way you want your subordinates to communicate with you. This means not being afraid to ask a question when something is not clear. It also means being candid when it is both needed and appropriate. We don't want our subordinates to be "yes men," and thus, you should not be a "yes man" to your boss. If you are struggling to communicate with your boss, we suggest you have a conversation with that person about your issues with communication. Most bosses will want you to be able to communicate with them, and will thus, help you find a way in which to do it best. We recognize that communicating with a boss is usually much easier said than done.

I (Robert) messed this up once when I was a CSM. My brigade was holding their annual ball at Fort Cavazos and my commander, and I were planning on attending. The catch was that our battalion was located at Fort Bliss, and we would need to travel to attend. We were looking forward to the event because we knew the value of speaking with our rater and senior rater face-to-face. The ball was scheduled to happen on a Saturday, and we were going to leave Fort Bliss on Friday. The Monday prior we received a message from our brigade commander in which he requested we wear our dress-mess uniform.

I had no dress-mess uniform and saw this as a problem. My boss and I spoke it over, in which he mentioned that he had purchased his once he knew he was committed to the Army and was going to be part of the profession of arms. To me, the communication was loud and clear. Get a dress-mess uniform quickly. I immediately went to the local Clothing and Sales store to discover that the only way to get this uniform was to order it online from Marlow White. Luckily for me Marlow White has a special package for such occasions, and for only a few extra hundred dollars I could get my uniform by Thursday morning.

I scurried around to get my measurements and place my order. I went back to the Clothing and Sales and purchased all the medals and other accouterments necessary to complete my new ensemble. The uniform arrived Thursday morning with everything sewn on and fit like a glove. My commander and I were both happy, and we felt that we were meeting with the intent of our boss. When we arrived at the ball on Saturday evening, we were the only battalion command team in the dress-mess uniform.

As it turned out, the brigade commander specifically did not want anyone to purchase a dress-mess if they did not already have one. He simply wanted those who had them to wear it for a photo. This was a $1200.00 lesson in asking for clarification. I was so concerned that I would appear uncommitted to the Army that I spent way more than I needed to for no real reason. That said, there was some value in being the only command team that did as the brigade commander asked. While we did not seek clarification, and it cost me a lot of money, we communicated our commitment through our actions.

I suppose this was a story of both good and bad communication with a boss. This brings me to another point about communicating with your boss. You will be judged on your actions, not your words (although it is awesome when they both align). Thus, the best way to communicate competence, commitment, and loyalty is to demonstrate them in your actions. Let your video match your audio, and unless your commander is asking you to do something that is illegal, unethical, or immoral, it's probably a good idea to do it.

When and Where to Provide Feedback to Your Boss

Power dynamics offer a complication to effective communication. In normal boss-subordinate relationships, the boss holds the power, and may or may not be receptive to your attempts at communication especially if it is candid feedback relating to command decisions. In most cases timing is everything. I (Robert) have found the best time to communicate with my boss is before a decision is made, and in private. In this scenario, I can be candid with my boss without her or him feeling I am being disrespectful or insubordinate.

The second and third best times are tricky and situation dependent. If I choose to communicate with my boss after a decision has been made in a private location, this can work if my boss asks for my opinion. In some cases, bosses may not be receptive since the decision has been made, so tread lightly here. The other tricky communication time is before a decision is made, but in public (like a meeting). Unless my boss is good with open and divergent discussions, it is best to save your input for a private setting. I once worked for a general officer (GO) who said he valued divergent thinking. That is until one day a Colonel offered a different perspective on a topic in a public forum. It turned out that particular GO did not really value divergent opinions,...at least in public.

The final option to engage is candid feedback from your boss in public and after a decision has been made. We humbly suggest you never do this. To keep these ideas straight, consider the following diagram.

Remember, communicating in private prior to a decision is best, and publicly second guessing your boss after they have made a decision should be avoided at all costs, as it is a quick way to lose trust. This is bad because once you lose the trust of your boss, mission command fails.

Mind Reading

Mind reading is a superpower that allows the hero to read the mind of others to accomplish their mission. It is also a work of fiction. Yet many

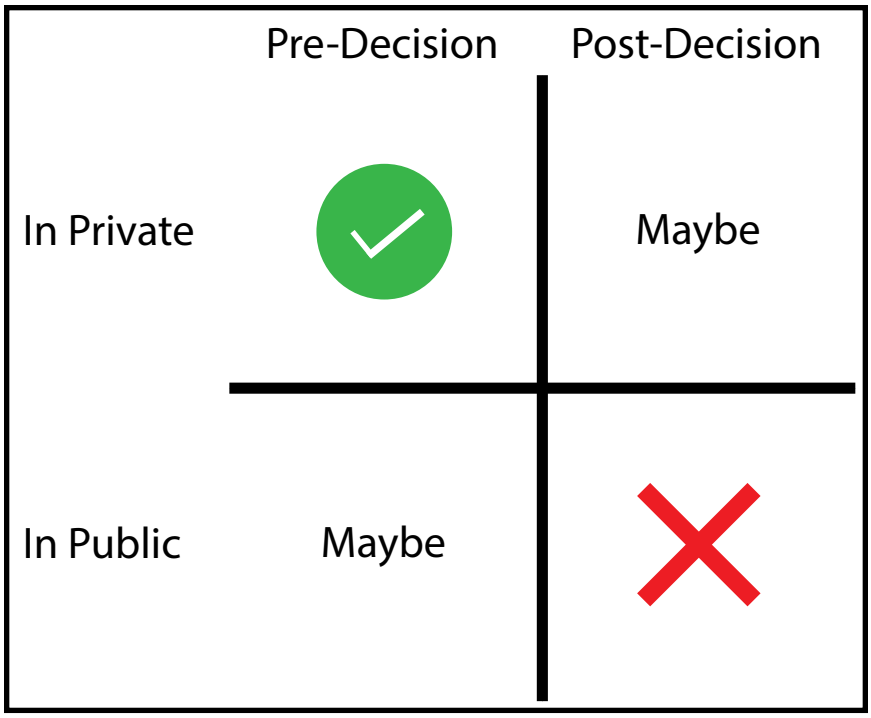


Figure 8.2. Decision Diagram. To give credit where credit is due, I stole this from SGM William (Bill) Ferguson, who stole it from a former commander. Hey…don't reinvent the wheel if you do not have to.

leaders must believe that mind reading truly exists because they seem to expect it from their subordinates. How many bosses think that their subordinates will know exactly what to do and how to do it without ever saying anything. Is it possible to create such a strong level of shared understanding that this can happen? Yes. Is it going to happen without hard work and strong effort towards communication from the leader? No. So how do we get there?

First, separate mission command, which is having a shared understanding with your boss's vision, and required disciplined initiative on your part, with being able to predict what your boss wants in an unfamiliar situation. To know what your boss wants requires them to invest enough time in your relationship, so you understand not only what the linear plans of action are, but what end states are prioritized. Now switch the roles and put you in the latter position. Do your soldiers truly understand what's important to you? Are you honest with them and candid on what parts of performance mean the most or what you expect from them as far as their work-life balance? How about your position on discipline and standards?

I (Richard) will never forget watching a soon-to-be Sergeant Major stand up and give a passionate soliloquy on how we should always enforce standards and discipline. His tone was strong, his words were forceful, and his hands were in his pockets. To me this means what words were coming out of his mouth and what he was truly saying were juxtaposed. His words said we must enforce all standards. What he communicated non-verbally is that we enforce all standards with which he agreed. Furthermore, he left out one crucial key ingredient for someone to truly be able to understand where someone is coming from: he left out the Why. Maybe it was because he clearly didn't believe in what he was saying but he never got around to why it is important to enforce standards and discipline. If I was one of his soldiers, I probably would have been left wondering what standards and disciplines he wants enforced, and which ones obviously can slide. This means that since I'm not getting clear messaging from the leader, I would have to rely on that good old superpower of mind reading.

So how do we avoid forcing our subordinates to read our minds? By clearly explaining ourselves, and then carrying on conversations. Being approachable by them so they can ask clarifying questions that might help expand their understanding of our vision and what we want to see complete. If you think something might require further explanation, just ask. Encourage your subordinates to ask for clarifying information. If you offer it unnecessarily, you look like you're micromanaging However if you never offer it, you are putting them in a situation where they need to read your mind.

Mission Command and Communication

Communication is critical to creating a shared understanding of the commander's intent, which are critical principles of mission command, and it is a little scary to think of all the ways that it can go wrong.[17] Luckily, all of the points discussed above are proven tools that leaders can employ to improve the communication throughout their organizational footprint. By accounting for the illocutionary force and the use of active listening and feedback, leaders can build an environment of trust that improves communication.

To do this, leaders must do more than "parrot" the mission statement from an order or repeat a directive verboten (although we suggest this is always the best starting point). NCOs must understand, then translate all pertinent information in operations orders into language that their unique formations will understand. Thus, NCOs must work hard to develop a shared language (meaning of critical words) within their formations before an order is issued.

One of the places that communication fails in regard to mission command is in the leader's communication prior to the planning or execution of a mission. Answering the "why" is an excellent place for leaders to start to build the trust required for mission command to work. Leaders who like to bog down their subordinates with details and overburdensome requirements to check in every three minutes will never create a team capable of utilizing mission command. Leaders who spend the vast amount of their time micromanaging are unable to change over to mission command successfully. Their team is unable to perform with any level of autonomy. If the leader had learned to communicate and create a shared understanding prior to the ordeal that forced mission command upon them, then their team would have had the understanding and capabilities needed to complete a task using disciplined initiative when it was needed the most.

I (Richard) can unfortunately think of an example when mission command went very wrong. I had the unique opportunity of working with a recruiting battalion staff during the early age of the social media boom. A very innovative yet inarticulate battalion Commander had given his staff some guidance to develop a plan. "I want to look at how we are rewarding soldier performance. Maybe military schooling is not the best reward mechanism. Please take a look at the current policy and tell me how we can be creative. Let's meet back up in two weeks to discuss."

The problem with this guidance is that it appeared to be clear and concise. The entire staff, and everyone present thought that the commander was asking the team to come up with some level of innovation and rewarding mechanisms for soldiers. However, in two weeks, they had learned that they had just wasted their time developing the wrong plan.

The battalion Commander had found out that some of the local schools were offering classes on digital and social media marketing techniques. At this time, the recruiting command did not really leverage any form of digital communication outside of emails so he was hoping that these classes could help further develop the soldiers. While he was correct, and later the recruiting command would move almost entirely to the digital domain for the recruiting efforts, he was stuck in a leadership trap that many good leaders fall into. He was hoping through vague guidance, his team would stumble upon the same opportunity that he had and decide that it was the best

way to go. When asked about it later, he said that if the battalion team had come up with the same plan of action that he had, it would serve as sort of a litmus test that he was on the right track. However, when they didn't come up with the right plan of action, because they didn't know that that's where they should have been searching, he was not only upset with his choice but disappointed in his staff as well. If he had communicated clearly from the beginning that his intent was to start training the best recruiters and digital and social media marketing, he probably would have gotten properly funded and fitted for the initiative. Instead, he deliberately withheld key information and what his guidance was which impeded a shared understanding. For those wondering, eventually a program the battalion Commander blessed off on was created; however, he was incredibly heavy-handed in his micromanagement after the team had failed to read his mind the first time.

A time when communication in Mission Command paid off was when I was a team leader in the infantry. The squad leader had worked extensively with us and spent more time asking myself and my partner team leader what we think we should do in situations instead of telling us what to do. When he did give guidance, he would ask if we understood. When we said we did, he would always counter with "Then tell me what I just told you in your own words". If we got it right, he would complement our attention to detail. If we got it wrong, he would not chastise us but instead would explain what we may have missed. He was not condescending, and it seemed like his ultimate goal was for myself, my fellow team leader, and him, to all think the same. This was put to the test during a combat deployment along the Pakistan Afghani border.

Our squad had been given a choke point in a hilly pass to look out for smugglers bringing weapons, money, or bomb making materials through the pass from Pakistan into Afghanistan. We had two-gun trucks set up just high enough on the hill to give us higher ground without silhouetting our vehicles throughout the entire Ridgeline. On that day, a truck came flying out of the Pakistan side of the pass. There were three armed men and boxes of supplies and the bed of the truck, and when they spotted us, they took a few pop shots while the

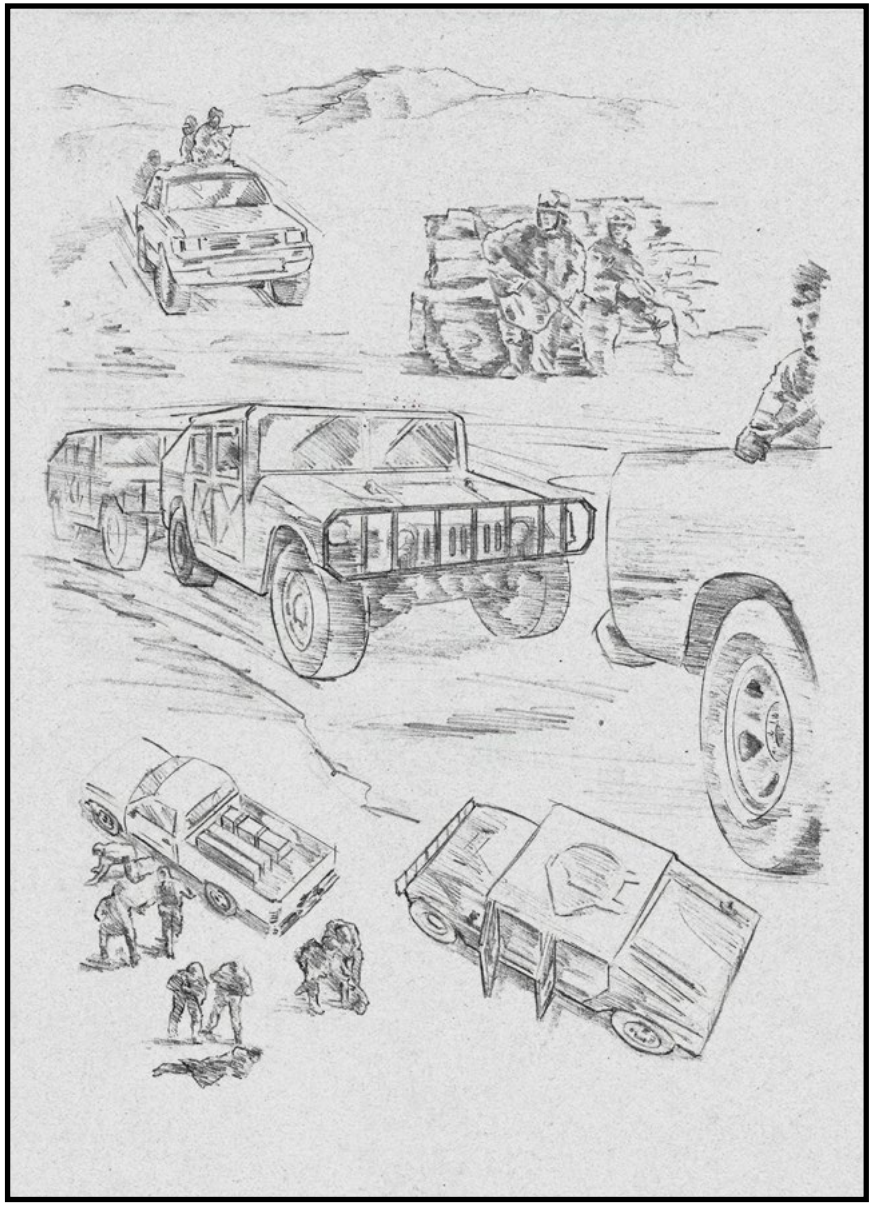


Figure 8.3. Building Trust and Communication. Dale Cordes, untitled, 2026, graphite on paper, Lawrence, Kansas.

truck started screaming down the road. Without any orders needing to be given, both vehicles picked up the chase while radioing the situation back to our platoon so they could intercept further down the path. About 2 minutes into the Chase,

the squad leader's truck died and rolled to a sad stop. As my driver started to slow down, we heard a one word command come over the radio from the squad leader.

"GO!!!!"

That was all we needed. We continued to pursue the truck and used suppressive fire to stop them from veering off the path so we could guide them directly into the waiting interception point with the rest of our platoon. I radioed updates to the platoon sergeant and when asked what happened to our squad leader, I gave the three-word reply "His trucks dead". The squad leader-maintained radio silence until the enemy had moved into the choke point where they were confronted and captured. After the operation, we found out that the truck was carrying one of the most valuable HVTs in our area, along with enough materials to make about 50 IEDs.

The squad leader did not feel that it was necessary to waste valuable airtime asking for updates or trying to sideline quarterback our action from a dead truck. He had used communication to create shared understanding which enabled him to trust us when he needed to most. If our squad leader had not invested the time into creating that shared understanding and practicing effective communication prior to that mission, then chances are they would not have felt confidence having one truck lead the enemy into the interception point and instead would have asked us to stop and pick him up, which could have meant that the truck escaped and our unit would have had to suffer 50 more IEDs in the area.

The purpose of sharing this story with you is to create a shared understanding of exactly how crucial mission command can be in a combat environment. Mission command is not a switch that you flip on one day and it just works. It is fueled by effective communication, active listening, and a shared understanding so it is a capability that you have when you need it the most.

Communication and Learned Behavior

Communication is a social phenomenon, and in many cases, it can happen without words. The way in which we do things in our organizations is socially constructed, and as new people enter the organization,

much of what is communicated to them about the way things are done are seldom voiced in words. Have you heard of the five-monkey experiment?

While there are several slightly different versions of the experiment, the story generally goes like this. Scientists put five monkeys in a cage. Inside the cage, a bunch of bananas were suspended from the ceiling. Underneath the bananas was a ladder. In the experiment, every time a monkey attempts to climb the ladder, the scientists spray it with water. Eventually behaviorism set in and the monkeys quit trying to climb the ladder. Next, the scientists replaced one of the monkeys with a new monkey. Having never been sprayed, the new monkey attempted to climb the ladder. Seeing this, the monkeys who had been doused with water physically impeded the new monkey from climbing the ladder. Over time, all of the old monkeys were replaced one by one. Each new monkey that was introduced attempted to climb the ladder and was retained by the other monkeys. This continued even after all of the old monkeys were replaced. The new monkeys were still engaging in stopping any new monkey from climbing the ladder, even though they had never been sprayed. This is a great story to tell newcomers in an organization to encourage them to speak up if something does not make sense. How many times have you heard the line, "this is just how we do it here," or "we have always done it this way;" bunches we bet (pun intended). The five-monkey experiment is a good story to tell, as it explains the reason why people will sometimes do things that do not make sense because of behavioral conditioning. One note though, the story is not true, and the experiment never happened as it is commonly depicted. But there was a study printed in 1967 called "Cultural Acquisition of A Specific Learned Response Among Rhesus Monkeys in which the monkey's developed conditions responses, but only once did the old monkey attempt to restrain the new monkey…most of the time they just looked fearful when the new monkey would go for the bananas." We mention this so that if you ever use the five monkey story to encourage new people to speak up, and you should because people remember stories, you won't get called out by some smartphone wielding member of the ROAD (Retired On Active Duty) scholars in your unit.

A Final Word on the Our 10 Rules Communication

In conclusion, if you have made it this far, you are already thinking about communication and why it often fails to happen in the way leaders intend. As you ponder these things and think about ways to improve communication within your organization, keep these simple rules in mind, and you will be moving in the right direction.

- **Communication is the hardest thing you attempt to do every day.**
- **If something can be interpreted two ways, and one of the ways will result in mission failure, that is the way it will be interpreted.**
- **Words mean different things to different people; learn the language of your organization.**
- **Do not assume that your message is so clear that it cannot be misinterpreted.**
- **Overcommunicate your message by a factor of 10.**
- **Never pass up an opportunity to communicate your message directly with soldiers**
- **What you do communicates a message more accurately than what you say.**
- **Ensure your video always matches your audio.**
- **Never rely on email to communicate bad news or to provide criticism; it will be misinterpreted and haunt you forever.**
- **Communication is more about listening than talking. If communication is really bad in your unit, try shutting the **** up.**
- **Never underestimate how bad of a communicator you are. Don't take it personal, everyone else is bad at communication too.**
- **Units who communicate well, win. An investment in improving communication is an investment in winning.**

Questions for Discussion

- **Counseling Outcomes**

  Reflect on a recent unit interaction (such as a briefing or counseling session) where one of these was lacking. How did it impact trust or mission outcomes, and what one change could you implement to strengthen that technique in your leadership?

- **Active Listening**

  Share a time when you listened to respond rather than to understand (as per Stephen Covey). What nonverbal cues (such as note-taking or eye contact) could you have used to shift to active listening, and how might that have improved the conversation?

- **Shared Understanding**

  How do you ensure subordinates are not assuming intent, especially in ambiguous orders?

- **The Meaning of Words**

  How can leaders mitigate this by aligning video (actions and nonverbals) with audio (words), as per the chapter's rules?

- **Body Language**

  Assess your own nonverbals: What feedback have you received (or observed) about how they affect soldiers' perceptions, and how can you adjust to foster approachability and trust?

- **Communication and Power**

  Recall a situation where you needed to give candid feedback upward (before or after a decision). Did you choose private and pre-decision timing? If not, what were the consequences, and how does this tie into building trust without appearing insubordinate?

- **Mind Reading**

  How can you build shared understanding in your team to avoid micromanagement, especially in high-stakes or unfamiliar scenarios?

- **Monkey Business**

  Identify a monkey ladder norm in your unit (such as inefficient processes or jargon). How can leaders encourage new soldiers to speak up, and what role does active listening play in breaking these cycles?

- **The Culture of Communication**

  Cultural factors in communication (per ADP 6-22) include sensitivity to diverse backgrounds, jargon, and intersubjective meanings. How has jargon enhanced or impeded communication in your experience (such as acronyms confusing new soldiers)? Discuss strategies to create a shared language in multicultural units, tying into the chapter's emphasis on overcommunicating by a factor of 10.

- **The 10 Rules of Communication**

What actionable steps can you take as an NCO to invest in better communication and building trust?

Recommended Further Reading

"Growing Tomorrow's Leaders," by Sgt. 1st Class Nathan P. Feinberg, *The NCO Journal*, June 2021.

"Anchors in the Storm of Change," by Sgt. 1st Class Jarea P. Perez, *The NCO Journal*, February 2026.

Endnotes

1. Department of the Army, ADP 6-22: *Leadership and the Profession* (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2019), Pgs. 5-14–5-16.

2. ADP 6-22, Pg. 5-14.

3. *ADP 6-22*, Pg. 5-16.

4. ADP 6-22, Pg. 5-16.

5. Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2013). This is one of the most well-known self-help books that many people find themselves reading or having it recommended to them. A lot of NCOs recommend this book to other NCOs.

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7. Andy. 7 Key Elements of Active Listening. evolution. 29 July 2021. https://evolutionjobs.com/exchange/7-key-elements-of-effective-communication/.

8. Dylan Taylor, "Active Listening and Empathy for Better Working Relationships," *Forbes Magazine*: July 2023. https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesbusinesscouncil/2023/07/28/active-listening-and-empathy-for-better-working-relationships/.

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10. Department of the Army, ADP 6-0: Mission Command: The Command and Control of Army Forces (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2019).

11. John Langshaw Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

12. David Marquet, *Leadership is Language: The Hidden Power of What You Say and What You Don't* (Portfolio. 2020).

13. Judith A. Hall and Mark L. Knapp, editors, *Nonverbal Communication* (De Gruyter Mouton, 2013); Valerie Manusov and Miles L. Patterson, editors, *SAGE Handbook of Nonverbal Communication* (SAGE, 2006); David Matsumoto, Hyisung C. Hwang, and Mark G. Frank, editors, *APA Handbook of Nonverbal Communication* (American Psychological Association, 2016).

14. Miles L. Patterson, Alan J. Fridlund, and Carlo Crivelli, "Four Misconceptions About Nonverbal Communication," *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, vol. 18, no. 6, Nov. 2023, pp. 1388–1411. doi:10.1177/17456916221148142.

15. ADP 6-22, Pg. 5-16.

16. Tyler Ribeiro, "The Monkeys and the Banana," Hoard's Dairyman, 6 Sept. 2017, hoards.com/blog-21633-the-monkeys-and-the-banana.html.

17. Hector Navarro, “The Truth of the Monkey Ladder Experiment,” Facts-Chology, 9 Nov. 2023, factschology.com/factschology-articles-podcast/monkey-ladder-experiment-truth.

Chapter 9

Developing the Workplace

No one knows who first coined the phrase "people quit bosses, not jobs," but if you do not believe it to be true, you have not had very many bosses. When I (Robert) was a Staff Sergeant, I prided myself on being seen as approachable. The problem, however, was that I didn't really know how other people saw me, and I did not learn that people may not have seen me in the same way I saw myself until a SGT had the courage to tell me. Until that conversation, I had considered myself the most approachable person in the unit, but I wasn't acting that way when I was screaming at a soldier for a minor infraction. It took a lot of time and effort to develop the self-awareness to understand how my actions were not only making me unapproachable to some of my soldiers, but were negatively impacting the work environment.

Army Doctrinal Publication 6-22 tells Army leaders that they are responsible to "create the conditions for a positive environment, build trust and cohesion on their team."[1] It turns out that screaming at soldiers for having their hands in their pockets when it's cold outside does not create a positive environment. Trust me on this. Telling the soldier "hey, take your hands out of your pockets and go get your gloves" in a normal voice is a far better approach. The best approach however, would be to figure out why the soldier didn't have her or his gloves on. The soldier might not have a pair of gloves, which could be an indicator of a much deeper problem.

The Anatomy of the Environment

Environments consist of both climate and culture. "Culture consists of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize the larger institution over time…Climate is a shorter-term experience than culture and reflects how people think and feel about their organization."[2] A strong Army culture and organizational environment will have six elements that noncommissioned officers can affect at any level.

Assessing the Environment, Step One: Arriving at a Unit

It's easy to assume that a leader must fully assess their environment before taking steps to shape it, but that's only partially true. The process of building a positive environment begins the moment a new leader arrives. Every action, every interaction, and even the attitude you bring during in-processing sends a message and starts shaping the climate. If you show

1. The Army culture and unit climate foster unity, cohesion, and trust.

2. The culture promotes and rewards mental agility, the ability to break from established paradigms, recognize new patterns or circumstances, and adopt new solutions to problems.

3. The Army supports the selection of leaders and rewards members who demonstrate the ability to sense and understand the environment quickly to exploit fleeting opportunities or counter unexpected threats.

4. The Army requires and rewards delegation of authority on the part of leaders, and the understanding and prompt, thorough execution of leader's intent (two levels up) by subordinates.

5. The Army selects and rewards leaders who provide clear priorities and focus their unit's time and organizational energy on their mission.

6. The Army culture is one of inclusion that demands diversity of knowledge and perspectives to accomplish missions ethically, effectively, and efficiently.

Figure. 9.1. Characteristics of a Healthy Army Culture.

up arrogant, dismissive, or overly rigid, you may begin to foster a culture of mistrust before you're even fully in the role.

There's a common saying I (Robert) have heard many times: *"Go in like a lion, and out like a lamb."* The idea behind it is that a leader should arrive hard, imposing strict standards, being tough, tolerating no mistakes, and then gradually soften their approach over time as trust is built, leaving on a high note to be remembered fondly. While this approach may offer a sense of control or an "easy button," it's far from a universal truth. Leadership is not a performance of intimidation followed by warmth; it's a consistent commitment to values, people, and standards.

The best leaders maintain high expectations from day one, but not through fear or force. You don't need to appear intimidating to avoid seeming weak. In fact, intimidating behavior often has the opposite effect: it breeds mistrust, discourages open communication, and suppresses initiative. Instead, lead by example. Address issues with professionalism, correct deficiencies fairly, and prioritize engagement with your team to begin understanding the environment firsthand. By pairing unwavering standards with consistent, open communication, you establish predictability, an essential ingredient for trust. And once trust is in place, people will

begin to speak openly about what's really going on. That's when the true assessment, and the real work of leadership, can begin.

I (Rich) remember the first change of responsibility that I had a part in. I was the Battalion guidon bearer for a Battalion CSM Change of Responsibility (COR). Our outgoing CSM had a reputation for being a showboat. You could count on him to make a big ordeal of performing the smallest of tasks if soldiers were around and completing no tasks if no one was around. For the ceremony, the outgoing CSM insisted that the entire Battalion formation needed to practice with him, the Commander, and the incoming CSM. No key leader practice, everyone there for all run throughs. It was an outside ceremony in the middle of the Summer and there wasn't a single soldier in the formation who wanted to be out there practicing. Most of us had important things to get done that day before going home. The outgoing CSM made a big show of making "on the spot corrections" of his soldiers in a loud and embarrassing way, many of which were incorrect. The incoming CSM stayed quiet and watched this charade calmly and without comment. When the time came to pass the guidon, the outgoing CSM and Commander started arguing about where hands go and what foot they should step forward with. Finally, the incoming CSM had clearly had enough.

He turned to the Commander and said calmly "Sir, I am pretty much sure that the three of us can get this down perfectly after the main rehearsal. How about we put a pin in it for now, finish this run-through and let the soldiers go do some work?"

The Commander smiled and agreed. Less than ten minutes later the formation was released to go take care of whatever we needed taking care of. The last thing that happened before we were dismissed was the Commander asked the incoming CSM if he wanted to say anything to the formation.

His answer was, "Sir, it's pretty hot out here and I'm not the CSM for another day. If you are ok with it, I'll talk to the troops tomorrow at lunch after the ceremony."

I won't say that the incoming CSM was the best CSM I had ever had, but I will say that with those two sentences, he won the respect of the soldiers in that formation and improved the Battalion climate. Something that the outgoing CSM never did.

Assessing the Environment, Step 2: Assessing the Environment

Assessing an environment begins with an active, engaged presence. Leaders cannot wait passively for information to be filtered up through the ranks, they must get out, observe directly, and interact with their soldiers and civilians at every level. According to *ADP 6-22*, leaders who "personally share hardship and risk demonstrate to subordinates that they are invested in the outcome."[3] These interactions provide invaluable, unfiltered insights into team dynamics, morale, and the organizational climate. Walking the footprint, asking thoughtful questions, and genuinely listening are essential first steps in building an accurate picture of the environment.

Once initial impressions are formed, leaders should deliberately look for indicators of the unit's alignment with Army Values and the Army Ethic. Some examples might include the following observations. Are soldiers taking the initiative, or are they hesitant and risk-averse? Are standards upheld consistently, or are they selectively enforced? Do leaders at all levels feel empowered to make decisions and speak candidly? These behavioral cues often reveal the underlying health of the unit better than any formal report or briefing. Leaders must be especially alert to the presence of counterproductive behaviors such as toxic leadership, micromanagement, or apathy, which can erode trust and cohesion quickly.

Finally, a thorough assessment requires triangulating observations with structured feedback. Tools such as sensing sessions, leader professional development forums, and anonymous surveys can help clarify trends and uncover blind spots. However, these tools are only effective when soldiers trust the leader's intent. As *ADP 6-22* reminds us, "the relationship between the Army profession and the American people depends on trust," and that principle applies internally as well.[4] Soldiers must believe that their input will be used to improve the organization, not to punish or label them. When trust is present, honest feedback becomes the gateway to real understanding, enabling the leader to pinpoint root causes, prioritize issues, and begin shaping the environment toward one of excellence and mutual respect.

Once your assessment of the environment is complete, the next logical step is to develop a deliberate and well-informed plan of action. This begins by analyzing the information you've gathered to identify specific areas in need of improvement, whether it's morale, communication, discipline, or operational readiness. With these issues clearly defined, leaders should begin developing multiple COAs tailored to address each identified

weakness. Each COA must be evaluated thoroughly: consider available personnel and resources, verify key facts and assumptions, and assess both the potential limitations and associated risks. Attempt to forecast the likely outcomes of each option to determine which approach will yield the most positive and sustainable impact.

From this analysis, select a primary plan of action supported by several leader-driven initiatives aimed at addressing the target issues. These initiatives might include educating or counseling subordinates, implementing new training programs, adjusting or introducing policies, and ensuring systems of recognition and accountability are fair, consistent, and aligned with organizational goals. Execution should be intentional and transparent, with clearly communicated objectives and expected behaviors. Finally, no plan is complete without a mechanism for feedback and review. Leaders must periodically reassess the effectiveness of their actions, remain open to course corrections, and continue refining the plan based on changing conditions and new insights.[5] Specific concepts that may help NCOs to develop COAs are discussed in the next section.

The Construction of the Positive Environment

Be What You Want to See

The best way to build a positive environment is by setting the standard in everything that you do, both big and small. If you are a leader at any level in your organization, you are a standard bearer for the Army. When your subordinate thinks of any Army leader, they will see your face. Thus, whether you want to be or not, your soldiers see you as the face of the Army and will notice when you hold them to a different standard than you hold yourself. They will also look at you and see what "right looks like," and even if you are not right, they will think that you are. Be sure you do your best to set the standard in all that you do.

In a letter of advice to his son on the art of becoming a man, a famous British lord and diplomat, Philip Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield once said, "We are, in truth, more than half of what we are by imitation."[6] Chesterfield was warning his son to choose who he admires closely because we tend to mimic those who are around us. In psychology, this is known as modeling and falls under the school of social learning theory. It has been proven that when people do not know what to do or how to act, they mimic the people around them.[7] This concept has been covered many times in this text, but it is so important to every aspect of leadership that it warrants the *mother of all learning*, repetition. I believe that knowing that one's behavior is mimicked places a clear responsibility on leaders to model the behaviors, attitudes,

and standards they want to see in their soldiers. When leaders consistently demonstrate integrity, professionalism, and respect, they foster a culture where those traits are more likely to be mirrored by others. Setting the right example isn't just a matter of personal discipline, it's a powerful tool for shaping a cohesive, positive, and mission-focused work environment.

Communication, Again

Another great way to build a positive work environment is through continued positive communication with one's subordinates, even after your initial assessment of the environment (refer to chapter seven for ways to improve communication). Communication is one of those things that a leader can never take for granted and should be deliberately and frequently in the forefront of an NCO's mind. If you have soldiers that report to you, and you are not constantly thinking about ways to improve communication, it will get worse over time. Communication is sometimes uncomfortable, direct, and may convey anger. If you can approach an interaction with a positive tone, then do it. But don't shy away from conflict if conflict is needed. Sticking your head in the sand about a subordinate's bad performance will only create more problems down the road. When you do need to talk to someone about an issue, be clear, concise, and professional in your approach. Be willing to listen and to be listened to. Remember, communication is always a two-way street so if your subordinate isn't listening, you are part of the problem.

Recognition

Recognizing individual and team accomplishments is a powerful indicator of a positive organizational climate, and it is one that leaders can directly impact. In most of the units I (Robert) have served with, leaders generally did a decent job of acknowledging hard work, but there was always room for improvement. Recognition is something every leader should deliberately consider when in a position of authority. Soldiers notice who is being recognized, what they are being recognized for, and how consistently it happens. When I was a sergeant first class, our unit had a practice of awarding Certificates of Achievement to soldiers who scored a 290 or higher on the APFT (two Army fitness tests of record ago…yes, I'm starting to feel my age). Motivated by that incentive and my goal of making master sergeant, I put in extra effort and scored 300 on the next test. But in that cycle, no awards were handed out. It wasn't the end of the world, but I remember feeling disappointed. I had pushed myself to improve, and it felt like no one noticed.

That moment stuck with me. I made a mental note that if I ever became a first sergeant or command sergeant major, I would work with my commander early on to establish clear criteria for recognition, and ensure we stuck to it throughout our time in leadership. Consistency in recognition builds trust and predictability, and it sends the message that hard work will be seen and appreciated. It doesn't take much to say thank you, to give someone a coin or a certificate, or to pull a soldier aside and recognize their efforts in front of their peers, but those small actions can have a big impact on morale and motivation.

Accountability

Accountability is more than what leaders do at the first formation of the day. Just as important as recognizing excellence is holding people accountable when they fall short. Accountability is not about punishment, it's about maintaining standards, building trust, and creating a culture where expectations are clear and consistent. In a truly positive environment, not everyone is treated the same, but everyone is treated fairly. That distinction is critical. Fairness means that high performers are recognized and rewarded for their efforts, while those who are not meeting the standard are given honest feedback, development opportunities, and, when necessary, corrective action. When leaders shy away from addressing substandard performance, they don't avoid conflict, they cause it. And in doing so, they send an unspoken message that standards are optional and that accountability is not an important standard .

You can quote me on this: nothing crushes a high performer's morale faster than watching a poor performer who faces no consequences. Soldiers who work hard, take the initiative, and go the extra mile quickly become disillusioned when they see their efforts matched with silence, while others coast by with minimal effort and no repercussions. Over time, this creates resentment, reduces motivation, and undermines the credibility of leadership. The most effective leaders understand that fairness isn't about treating everyone identically, it's about giving everyone what they need to succeed and holding them to the same standards. When expectations are enforced unevenly, even with good intentions, it erodes trust and weakens the entire formation.

The best leaders I have worked for build cohesive teams by being clear, consistent, and courageous. They set high expectations, make sure everyone understands those expectations, and hold themselves and others accountable for meeting them. They recognize outstanding performance and ensure those who struggle are supported but not shielded from the consequences of poor effort or behavior. This balance is like walking

a tightrope, but this kind of leadership creates a climate where soldiers know what is expected, believe that effort matters, and feel empowered to take disciplined initiative. In these environments, trust grows, morale improves, and soldiers give their best, not because they must, but because they want to. That's how you build a winning team.

Enabling Disciplined Initiative

Disciplined initiative is not a buzzword, although you may hear it used like one. Disciplined initiative is the linchpin of mission command and must be encouraged at every opportunity. In order to develop an environment where soldiers take the initiative is challenging, but starts with building a climate of trust, where they feel empowered to make decisions and are not afraid to fail. To do this, leaders must clearly communicate their intent, allowing soldiers to understand not just what needs to be done, but why it matters. This shared understanding gives subordinates the confidence to act independently within the left and right limits of the mission.[8]

Another way to create soldiers who take initiative is to provide them with opportunities to lead in low-risk situations, such as planning a training event or leading a team task, helps them develop confidence and decision-making skills. In the 30 years I (Robert) spent on active duty, I seldom took on a task without involving either one or two of my subordinates. I did not delegate much, but I had them work with me on the task, and as they developed an understanding of what we were trying to accomplish, they began to offer suggestions. As time passed, I would always encourage them to act, and that they did not need to involve me in every decision. This worked out more times than not. However, on the occasions that it did not, I never punished or made a big deal of the failure. I would always say "we didn't kill anyone, we didn't do anything illegal, unethical, or immoral, so it will be okay. We now know what not to do, and we have the opportunity to fix this." When my subordinates saw that I could accept honest mistakes, they became more trusting of my character and felt more empowered to take intuitive in the future. Going further, leaders should also recognize and reward initiative, even when outcomes are imperfect, reinforcing the idea that acting is valued more than inaction. Constructive feedback, after-action reviews, and mentorship help shape and refine future efforts without discouraging boldness. Ultimately, soldiers take initiative when they know their leaders support them, trust them, and expect them to think critically and act decisively.

For a much longer list of things that leaders can do to build positive environments within their units, consider this chart that can be found in the 2019 version of ADP 6-0.[9]

Leaders establish and maintain positive expectations and attitudes to support effective work behaviors and healthy relationships. Leaders improve the organization while accomplishing missions. They should leave the organization better than it was when they arrived.	
Fosters teamwork, cohesion, cooperation, loyalty and esprit de corps	• Encourages people to work together effectively. • Promotes teamwork and team achievement to build trust. • Draws attention to the consequences of poor coordination. • Integrates new members into the unit quickly.
^Encourages fairness and respect	• Provides accurate evaluations and assessments. • Supports equal opportunity. • Prevents all forms of harassment. • ^Encourages learning about and leveraging different backgrounds, cultures and experiences.
Encourages open and candid communications	• Shows others how to accomplish tasks while respectful and focused. • Displays a positive attitude to encourage others and improve morale. • Reinforces expression of contrary and minority viewpoints. • Displays appropriate reactions to new or conflicting information or opinions. • Guards against groupthink.
Creates a learning environment	• Uses effective assessment and training methods. • Encourages leaders and their subordinates to reach their full potential. • Motivates others to develop themselves. • Expresses the value of interacting with others and seeking counsel. • Stimulates innovative and critical thinking in others. • Seeks new approaches to problems. • Communicates differences between professional standards and a zero-defects mentality. • Emphasizes learning from one's mistakes.
Encourages subordinates to exercise initiative, accept responsibility, and take ownership	• Involves others in decisions and informs them of consequences. • Allocates responsibility for performance. • Guides subordinate leaders in thinking through problems for themselves. • Allocates decision making to the lowest appropriate level. • Acts to expand and enhance subordinate's competence and self-confidence. • Rewards initiative.
Demonstrates care for follower well-being	• Encourages subordinates and peers to express candid opinions. • Addresses subordinates' and families' needs (health, welfare, and development). • Stands up for subordinates. • Routinely monitors morale and encourages honest feedback.
Anticipates people's on-duty needs	• Recognizes and monitors subordinate's needs and reactions. • Shows concern for how tasks and missions affect subordinate morale.
Sets and maintains expectations for individuals and teams	• Clearly articulates expectations. • Creates a climate that expects positive performance, recognizes superior performance, and does not accept poor performance. • Challenges others to match the leader's example.

Figure 9.2. Developing a Positive Culture.

Developing a Positive Culture

At the beginning of this chapter there are a few sentences that explain what culture is, and its impact on the work environment. Simply put, leadership builds culture and culture is the cornerstone to a positive environment. However, one should note, changing a culture of mediocrity (or any negative behavior) is far more difficult than implementing some changes to improve the environment. Culture is deeply rooted in organizational behavior and requires the most tenacious leader to improve it. At the same time, there are multiple behaviors that leaders can engage in that can degrade a unit's culture and create a poor work environment.

Be a Decent Human Being

When working to build a positive culture or improve a work environment, one of the most impactful things you can do is simple: do good for others without expecting anything in return. Small, thoughtful actions, like remembering birthdays or knowing the names of your soldiers' significant others, can go a long way in building trust and connection. Say hello when you pass your soldiers, and when you meet their spouse or parents, don't miss the opportunity to express how proud you are to have them on your team. Consider stepping up during holidays by volunteering for duty, allowing others to spend that time with their families.

> *When I (Robert) was a Command Sergeant Major, my commander and I quietly placed ourselves on the duty roster for Christmas. We didn't announce it or seek recognition, we simply posted the roster, showed up on Christmas Day, pulled staff duty, and went home. What surprised us most was the number of soldiers who stopped by just to see if we were really there. One group even brought us cookies. That small act wasn't about making a statement; it was about showing our soldiers that we shared in the burdens of service and lived the value of selfless service. In the end, those quiet actions spoke louder than any speech ever could. What can you do to show that you are a decent Human Being?*

Remember That No One is Perfect

Part of being human is recognizing that no one is perfect, and good, honest soldiers will make mistakes. As I matured in my leadership journey, it became a core part of my philosophy to underwrite honest mistakes (hopefully you learn this sooner than me). I firmly believe that accepting and learning from these missteps builds the trust necessary to enable the kind of disciplined initiative the Army will depend on in future conflicts. Trust isn't built solely through speeches or policy, it's forged in moments when leaders choose understanding over punishment, especially when a soldier's intent was right, even if the outcome was flawed.

> *One story that has always stuck with me (Robert) involves a soldier who stood before the Commander and me for his second reading of an Article 15. He had been cited for an open container violation at the main gate while returning from a party with his friends. When we asked what happened, he readily admitted there was an open container in the car, but said it belonged to his friend, who had been drinking. The sol-*

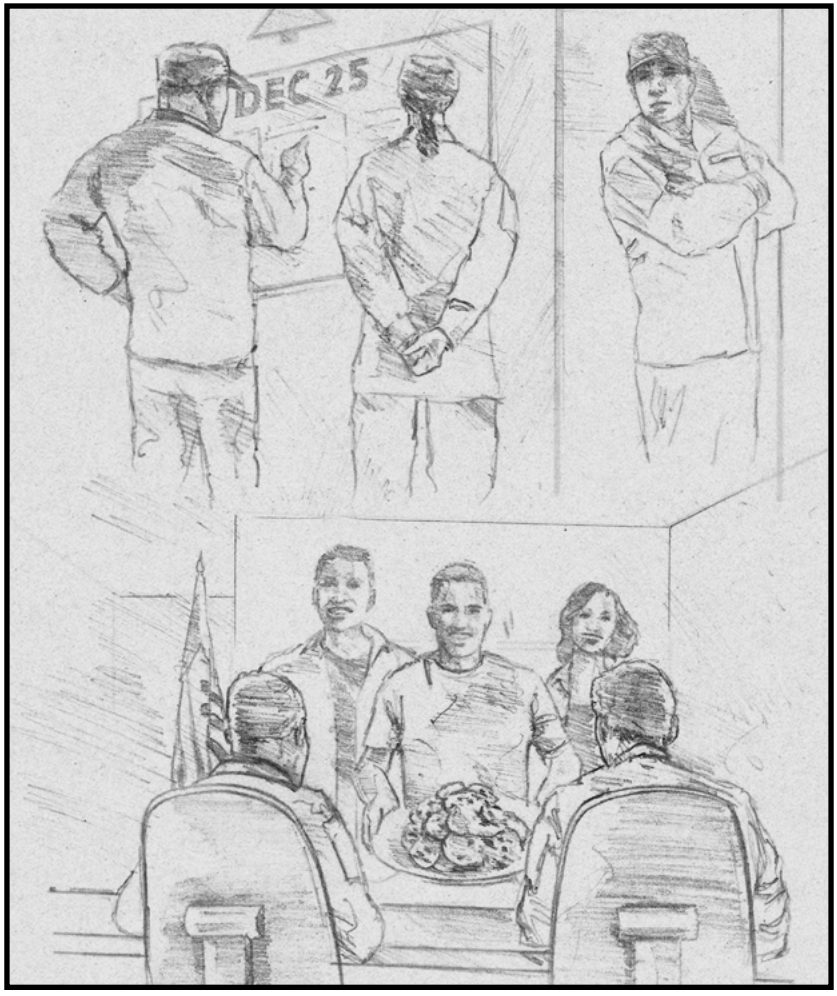


Figure 9.3. Developing the Workplace. Dale Cordes, untitled, 2026, graphite on paper, Lawrence, Kansas.

dier claimed he hadn't realized his friend had the drink when they got into the car. The drink had been placed in the front center console, right next to the driver's seat, which made the story hard to believe. When pressed, the soldier admitted to seeing the can but said he didn't know it contained alcohol. Skeptical, I asked what the drink was. He replied, "Tres Loco." I pulled out my phone and googled it. What popped up looked almost exactly like an Arizona Iced Tea. Honestly, had I seen the can in the motor pool, I probably wouldn't have thought twice. Still, the law is clear: as the driver, he

was responsible for everything inside the vehicle, and an open container is a punishable offense.

After a short deliberation, my Commander and I agreed on an unconventional punishment. Instead of formal punitive measures, we gave the soldier a unit coin, but with a catch. He would have to show the coin to other soldiers and explain what he had done; the right thing when no one else was looking. Here's what happened: the soldier's friend had been drinking at the party and was too intoxicated to drive. Rather than let his friend get behind the wheel, the soldier took the keys and drove him home. While his judgment in overlooking the drink could have been better, his intentions were honorable. He hadn't been drinking, and he made a responsible choice in looking out for his battle buddy. To this day, that's the only time I've seen a soldier walk into a commander's office for an alcohol-related incident and leave with a coin. What do you think that did for initiative in our formation? That small act sent a powerful message: honest mistakes, when made with the right intent, would not be met with crushing consequences. It built trust, and that trust encouraged the kind of initiative we all want in our soldiers.

What Not to Do

Everyone has stories about poor NCOs who created toxic (counterproductive) environments or damaged unit morale, and unfortunately, my friend Rich and I are probably the subjects of a few of those stories ourselves. Like many leaders, we made mistakes early in our careers, some of which no doubt had negative impacts on the teams we were trying to lead. However, what matters most is not where you start, but whether you're willing to reflect, grow, and change. With time, humility, and honest feedback, I believe both of us have learned valuable lessons from those experiences and worked hard to improve. That's why I firmly believe that no matter where you fall on the spectrum of influencing your organization's environment, whether you're struggling, succeeding, or somewhere in between, it is never too late to become better. Improvement isn't easy, but it is always possible, especially when we take the time to examine our behaviors with thoughtful reflection and a genuine desire to lead more effectively.

Overtask Your Best Soldiers

One important but often overlooked leadership principle is hidden in plain sight in Army doctrine. In *ADP 6-22*, the phrase "allocates re-

ADP 6-22, Pg. 8-7, paragraph 8-46 defines counterproductive leadership as "the demonstration of leader behaviors that violate one or more of the Army's core leader competencies or Army Values, preventing a climate conducive to mission accomplishment." Counterproductive leadership approaches can yield short term gains in times of high stress but ultimately will degrade a unit's moral and warfighting capability. It would be impossible to list all the behaviors that can constitute counterproductive leadership.

What might be added to this section that was not included?

Figure. 9.4. Counterproductive Leadership.

sponsibility for performance"[10] appears in the leader competency section. This idea is deceptively simple, yet its impact on team dynamics and morale is profound. In practice, this means that leaders, especially NCOs, must deliberately and fairly distribute responsibilities across their span of control. That doesn't mean every soldier gets the same task or workload; it means the work is spread in a way that develops the team while preserving balance. Too often, leaders fall into the trap of always turning to their top performers when something important needs to be accomplished. It's understandable, your best people deliver results, they don't complain, and they rarely say no. But relying too heavily on high performers is the leadership equivalent of hitting the "easy button." It may solve a short-term problem, but over time it damages the long-term health of the team.

High-performing soldiers often operate at full capacity. When leaders habitually pile more work onto them without thinking, it doesn't go unnoticed, it breeds resentment, burns them out, and sends the wrong message to the rest of the formation. Meanwhile, underperforming soldiers are left unchallenged and underutilized, missing out on opportunities to grow. I (Robert) have been on both ends of this dynamic in both military and civilian settings, and I can tell you firsthand that being overworked is demoralizing, even when you're proud of the results. It makes you feel like you're being taken for granted. As a leader, I've also made the mistake of overloading my best people out of convenience or misplaced confidence. In hindsight, I realize that failing to manage the workload fairly was not only a disservice to those top performers, but also a missed opportunity to develop others.

Good leadership requires intention. It requires us to look beyond convenience and think critically about how we manage our teams. By learning to allocate responsibility deliberately, noncommissioned officers not only protect and retain our best soldiers, but also create a stronger, more balanced, and more resilient unit. That's positive leadership.

Delegate and Micromanage Everything

Another tendency to avoid is over-delegation and micromanagement. This type of behavior is like Kryptonite to soldier initiative and detrimental to mission command. When leaders delegate all their responsibilities without maintaining ownership or involvement, they risk creating a culture of disengagement and confusion. Soldiers dislike leaders who pass off every task while failing to provide guidance, feedback, or support. Over time, this erodes trust and respect, as subordinates feel like they are being set up to fail or burdened with responsibilities without leadership investment. Delegation is a critical leadership skill, but without accountability or mentorship, it becomes an abdication. In these environments, junior soldiers may begin to feel unsupported, overworked, and undervalued, leading to resentment and a lack of motivation across the formation.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, micromanagement sends the message that leaders do not trust their subordinates to make decisions or perform basic tasks without interference. This stifles initiative, discourages problem-solving, and creates a fear-based environment where soldiers wait for permission rather than take ownership. Micromanaging leaders often create bottlenecks, slow down mission execution, and unintentionally train their teams to avoid responsibility. When combined with a tendency to delegate everything, it results in a paradoxical environment: soldiers are either left entirely on their own or suffocated by over-control. Neither extreme foster professional growth, teamwork, or trust. Effective leaders find balance, empowering their people through trust and guidance while staying actively engaged and accountable for outcomes.

Be a Jerk

Some leaders believe that there is a time and a place to be a jerk. However, the most effective answer to the question of when it is okay to be a jerk is never. If you need to know what behaviors result in someone being labeled as a jerk or the degradation to the unit environment that having a jerk for a leader will cause, you are probably not reading this book, or someone gave it to you to correct a few jerk-like behaviors. Never be a jerk. Write that down. End of section.

Shame Subordinates Publicly

In line with being a jerk is publicly shaming a person who has made a mistake. In addition to being an action that will erode trust, initiative, and ultimately mission command, ridiculing soldiers publicly can be classified as counterproductive leadership. Everyone likely has a story in which they were treated poorly by a superior in an open environment.

> *Shamefully, I (Robert) have done this a few times, and looking back regret every one. Here is an example that I am particularly ashamed of.*
>
> *When I was a platoon sergeant, one day I was in the motor pool when one of my ambulances returned from supporting one of our companies during a field training exercise. I greeted the occupants and asked the sergeant (the senior person on this mission) how things went. The sergeant proceeded to tell me how poorly things had gone and provided me with a list of problems he had encountered. From my perspective, all the problems he faced were easily solvable if he were to leave the vehicle and speak with someone in charge. When I asked him what he had done, he said he did not know what to do or who to talk to. I was furious.*
>
> *How could one of my NCOs sit in an ambulance and encounter missed meals, poor communication, and almost run out of fuel without talking with the 1SG or company commander of the host unit? I began to scream obscenities at the sergeant. For emphasis on how poorly I thought he performed, I smashed my coffee mug and threw my leader-book across the motor pool. I was screaming, coffee was everywhere, the contents of my leader-book were littering the ground, the sergeant looked as though he was terrified, and I thought "good, my point is made."*
>
> *When the next Monday rolled around, the sergeant whom I had yelled at asked to speak with me about the situation. I had calmed down by then and wanted to speak with him as well. What I had failed to consider is that this sergeant was new to my formation and had only been in the company for two weeks. He hadn't even finished processing before I put him on a week-long mission. Worse yet, the unit that the sergeant was coming from was a fixed facility, and he had not been to the field since PLDC (BLC for this generation). Thus, I had*

sent an inexperienced, undertrained, and completely green NCO to support a field exercise. And when the NCO returned, he had been publicly embarrassed by someone who was supposed to help train him and take care of his needs.

I am embarrassed about this incident to this day. The only thing my counterproductive leadership accomplished was getting the ambulance unloaded quickly. Later that week, I asked soldiers who saw my actions what they thought. They said I was just being myself, a hard NCO with little sympathy for things I disliked, and they did not want to be on the receiving end of my anger. From my perspective, I was doing what I thought NCOs should do. I was holding someone accountable for what I considered to be poor performance. What a jerk I was! Sadly, I engaged in similar antics a few more times before I realized that I needed to change, and even then it took me some time.

Another problem with publicly shaming people is that it stifles initiative because people become fearful of "being next" if they make a mistake. This is important because when soldiers fail to take initiative, the unit loses a key element of mission command, which reduces our readiness and overall lethality. The next time you are thinking about making an example out of someone by "lighting them up" publicly, before you do it, consider the harm that you will do to your team. In closing this section, another point to remember is that I am not suggesting in any way to let standards slide or not hold soldiers accountable. Be strategic about it.

Engage in Gossip

Almost everyone likes a little tea. However, gossip is one of the most corrosive behaviors a leader can engage in because it undermines trust, the very foundation of any healthy team or organization. When leaders participate in or tolerate gossip, they send a message that confidentiality, integrity, and professionalism are optional. This weakens the moral authority they rely on to lead effectively. Gossip creates a climate of suspicion and fear, where team members begin to second-guess one another's intentions and actions. As trust erodes, so too does open communication, collaboration, and psychological safety. Leaders who indulge in gossip may feel temporarily powerful or included, but they ultimately sabotage their credibility and diminish the cohesion of their teams.

The ripple effect of gossip doesn't stop at damaged trust; it also crushes initiative. In environments where gossip is present, individuals become hesitant to speak up, take risks, or share ideas, fearing they'll become the

next target of behind-the-back commentary. Productivity stalls as energy is redirected toward protecting reputations instead of advancing the mission. Leaders must therefore actively reject gossip in all its forms, both by refusing to spread it and by refusing to listen to it. The wisdom is simple: if someone is gossiping to you about others, they are almost certainly gossiping about you to someone else. This principle holds as consistently as gravity and must be treated with the same seriousness. Strong leaders create a culture of respect, transparency, and trust, not by chance, but by setting a disciplined example in every conversation.

Judge Without Understanding

Stephen Covey famously wrote, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood," a principle that holds true for leadership at every level.[11] We should care what Covey thinks because his work, especially *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, has stood the test of time as a foundational guide for leadership, communication, and personal growth across both military and civilian sectors. When new NCOs enter a unit, failing to apply this mindset and instead leading with judgment can quickly damage trust, morale, and cohesion before they even begin to influence change.

When new leaders enter a unit with an over-judgmental mindset, they often do more harm than good to the work environment. This type of leader tends to ridicule existing practices, belittle the efforts of others, and constantly compare the unit to previous assignments, saying things like "there are no standards here" or "this isn't how we do it in the Army" or our favorite "back at Bragg, we always…" While the intent might be to drive improvement, the effect is usually quite the opposite. By failing to understand the local context and the hard work that may have gone into sustaining current operations, these leaders alienate their teams and erode morale.

Instead of building credibility, over-judgmental leaders often come across as arrogant, dismissive, and out of touch. They send a message that they value their past experience more than the people in front of them. This creates resentment and stifles open communication, as subordinates may become reluctant to share input or ask questions for fear of being criticized. Over time, this approach weakens trust and cohesion.

New leaders should enter with humility, curiosity, and a desire to learn. There may indeed be areas that need improvement but understanding the "why" behind the current state is essential before proposing change. Leaders who rush to judge without listening first often miss important context, damage relationships, and make it harder to implement meaningful improvements later. Respecting the work others have already done is a

foundational step toward earning influence and setting a more effective path forward.

Never Admit When You Are Wrong

Everyone likely knows or has worked with someone who cannot admit they are wrong. In addition to not being much fun to talk with, leaders who refuse to admit when they are wrong compromise their integrity and weaken their influence. No one expects perfection, but people do expect honesty and accountability, especially from those in positions of authority. When a leader doubles down on mistakes instead of owning them, it sends a message that ego matters more than truth, and saving face is more important than doing what is right. This creates an environment where others feel pressure to hide their own missteps, breeding a culture of fear and blame instead of growth and learning. The refusal to acknowledge error erodes respect, because followers quickly recognize that such leaders care more about appearing right than being right.

Admitting mistakes, on the other hand, is a sign of strength, not weakness. It models humility, accountability, and emotional intelligence, qualities that inspire trust and foster resilience in a team. When leaders acknowledge where they went wrong and take responsibility, they invite collaboration, open communication, and continuous improvement. But leaders who never admit fault isolate themselves from feedback and rob their teams of teachable moments. They stifle innovation by punishing imperfection rather than encouraging progress. In the long run, a refusal to admit being wrong doesn't preserve authority, it slowly dissolves it. The strongest leaders understand that credibility is earned not by being flawless, but by being honest, human, and committed to doing better. That is what improves a unit's environment, not maintaining the facade of perfection.

Hog the Credit

Another counterproductive behavior that erodes a unit's environment and destroys its culture is taking all the credit. When a leader (or anyone on the team) consistently takes all the credit for the accomplishments of the team, it breeds resentment, erodes morale, and fractures cohesion. Recognition is a powerful motivator, and when it is hoarded rather than shared, team members begin to feel undervalued and invisible. Over time, this leads to disengagement, as individuals stop going the extra mile, knowing their efforts will be overlooked or claimed by someone else. Innovation and initiative decline because people no longer see the point in investing themselves in the mission if their contributions are not acknowledged. In the worst cases, talented individuals will seek opportunities elsewhere,

taking their skills and commitment with them. This is not good for units or the Army.

Hogging credit also isolates the leader, even if unintentionally. Trust is lost when team members feel used rather than being appreciated, and honest feedback becomes rare as people distance themselves emotionally. A leader who takes all the credit teaches others that advancement comes through self-promotion, not teamwork, fostering a culture of competition rather than collaboration. This undermines the very unity and mutual support that a strong unit relies on. In contrast, great leaders deflect praise toward their people, building pride and ownership within the team. They understand that when credit is shared generously, loyalty grows, performance improves, and the whole unit moves forward together.

Managing Power

Power is one of the most fascinating forces that enables leadership. When used for good, it can motivate people to reach heights they never thought they could have. When used for evil, it can drag down countries. Power corrupts, which according to Plato, is why smart people do not want it. Plato believed that philosophers should be chosen to rule, however, he believed that the only way a philosopher would accept the weight of the power that comes with being in charge was to threaten them to be ruled by someone inferior to themselves.[12]

One cannot fully understand the best approaches to building a positive environment without understanding power. In 1959, two psychologists, Dr. Bertram Raven and Dr. John R. P. French published one of the first peer reviewed articles on power and are considered by many to be the foremost experts in the application of it. So much so, that Army doctrine is based on their research.

In their seminal 1959 study, French and Raven introduced a foundational model identifying five distinct bases of power: coercive, reward, legitimate, expert, and referent.[13] If you have read Army leadership doctrine or studied for a promotion board, this should sound familiar. These categories describe how individuals exert social influence over others. Coercive power refers to the ability to punish or threaten negative consequences to gain compliance, such as through demotion or the removal of privileges. In contrast, reward power involves offering positive incentives, like bonuses, promotions, or praise, in exchange for cooperation or performance. Legitimate power arises from formal authority and is based on socially or structurally accepted rights to lead, often grounded in position or rank within an organization.

Legitimate Power	Reward Power	Coercive Power	Expert Power	Referent Power	Informational Power
Derived from a formal position or office held in an organization's hierarchy.	Ability to offer positive incentives, tangible rewards, or recognition.	Ability to punish, fire, or suspend. Power through fear and negative consequences.	Perception of possessing unique skills, specialized knowledge, or superior ability.	Based on charisma, personality, and the desire of others to identify with influencer.	Control over access to information, secrets, or specific data that others do not have.
• A CEO • A police officer • An elected official • A manager assigning tasks	• Bonuses • Promotions & praise • A sales incentive • A parent giving an allowance	• A manager threatening termination • A court sentence • Disciplinary actions • A strict teacher	• A historian • A brain surgeon • A skilled technician • A mentor providing complex advice	• A charismatic leader • An admired athlete • An influential colleague	• A project manager knowing a merger timeline • Someone with a data leak

Figure 9.5. French and Raven's Six Bases of Power.

Beyond these position-based or formal types of power, the French and Raven model also includes expert power and referent power. Expert power is derived from a person's knowledge, skill, or experience that others respect and depend on. Referent power stems from personal traits such as charisma, likability, or the ability to foster emotional identification, people follow because they admire or wish to emulate the leader. In 1965, Raven expanded the model by introducing a sixth type, informational power.[14] This form is based on the capacity to influence others through access to or control of information and reasoning, which can shape decisions without relying on formal authority or personal appeal.

Together, these six bases of power offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the different ways leaders can influence others. Coercive, reward, and legitimate power are grounded in structural authority and often result in short-term compliance through external pressure. In contrast, expert, referent, and informational power are more personal and relational, fostering deeper commitment and longer-lasting influence. Effective NCOs recognize the importance of balancing these power bases. While formal authority may ensure compliance, it is personal credibility, trust, and the skillful use of knowledge and communication that truly inspire initiative, loyalty, and sustained performance.

When reflecting on power, think about the most influential person you know. What kind of power gives them their influence? When I, Robert, was a young NCO, I believed my power came primarily from my rank, and to some extent, it did. But as I grew in experience and maturity, I realized that the most effective and enduring form of power is referent power.

When you possess referent power, people want to emulate you and are motivated to work hard because they don't want to let you down. As you consider the type of leader you aspire to be, it is crucial to think not only about how you will obtain power, but also how you will use it responsibly. Equally important is identifying the guardrails you can put in place to prevent misuse of that power.

Guardrails are safeguards that keep us on the right path and help us reach our goals without harm. This is especially important because power is inherently alluring and can easily be misused.[15] Our founding fathers understood this well when they divided governmental power into three separate branches. Having just fought to break free from the grip of a monarchy, they were determined to prevent the rise of another by creating checks and balances, guardrails, to keep each branch accountable to the others. On a personal level, guardrails might take the form of a trusted mentor or friend who will tell you the hard truths when necessary. They can also be formal policies that delegate authority to experts in specific areas, ensuring decisions are made wisely. Whatever form your guardrails take, be intentional in choosing them, they are essential to maintaining integrity and effective leadership. Do not take this lightly, if you are not at least a little afraid of power, you are not fit to hold it. Choose your guardrails well.

Questions for Discussion

- **Leader Self-Awareness**

  How can leaders realistically assess how their leadership style affects the climate of their unit?

- **Climate vs. Culture**

  What actions can a junior leader realistically take to influence each?

- **First Impressions in Leadership**

  What specific actions should a new NCO take during their first 30 days to positively influence the climate?

- **"Go in Like a Lion" Leadership Approach**

  Some leaders believe they must establish authority through intimidation early. Based on the chapter's argument, what are the risks of this approach? Are there any circumstances where it might be appropriate?

- **Modeling Behavior**

  What are some everyday behaviors leaders might overlook that unintentionally shape the culture of their team?

- **Recognition and Motivation**

  Why is consistent recognition of performance important for maintaining morale and trust? What are some ways leaders can recognize Soldiers without relying solely on formal awards?

- **Accountability vs. Fairness**

  How should leaders balance enforcing standards while also developing struggling Soldiers?

- **Developing Disciplined Initiative**

  Leaders must allow subordinates to make decisions and sometimes fail. How can leaders create an environment where Soldiers feel safe taking initiative without sacrificing standards?

- **Counterproductive Leadership Behaviors**

  The chapter identifies behaviors such as gossip, public shaming, micromanagement, and hogging credit as destructive to culture. Which of these behaviors do you think damages a team the most and why?

- **Power and Influence**

  Which forms of power do you believe are most effective for long-term leadership influence and why?

Recommended Further Reading

"Are You Developing Team Leaders? A Call to First Sergeants," by Command Sgt. Maj. Randolph "DP" Delapena, *The NCO Journal—Muddy Boots*, April 2025.

"By Example: DFAC Manger's Positive Approach Encourages Creativity," by Megan Portillo, *The NCO Journal*, November 2015.

"Fostering a Culture of Respect and Recognition," by Sgt. D'Angelo Isaac, *The NCO Journal*, June 2025.

ADP 6-22 Army Leadership and the Profession. Provides doctrinal guidance on creating positive organizational climates, building trust, and developing leaders.

ADP 6-0 Mission Command. Explains disciplined initiative, commander's intent, and how leaders build environments where subordinates can act independently.

Endnotes

1. Department of the Army, *ADP 6-22: Leadership and the Profession* (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2019), Pg. 6-4.

2. *ADP 6-22,* Pg. 6-5.

3. *ADP 6-22,* Pg.1-14.

4. *ADP 6-22,* Pg. 6-5.

5. *ADP 6-22,* Pg.1-69.

6. Philip Dormer Stanhope Chesterfield, *Letters to His Son on the Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman*. Edited by Oliver H.G. Leigh, (Project Gutenberg, 2004, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3361).

7. Bandura, Albert. *Social Learning Theory*. Prentice-Hall, 1977.

8. Department of the Army, *ADP 6-0: Mission Command: The Command and Control of Army Forces*)Headquarters, Department of the Army, July 2019).

9. *ADP 6-22,* Pg.6-8.

10. ADP 6-22, Pg. 6-8, Table 6-2.

11. Stephen R Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (Free Press, 1989).

12. Plato, *The Republic,* Translated by G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve, 2nd ed., (Hackett Publishing Company, 1992.

13. John R. P. French and Bertram H. Raven, "The Bases of Social Power," *Studies in Social Power*, edited by Dorwin Cartwright, (University of Michigan Press, 1959), 259–269.

14. Bertram H. Raven, "Social Influence and Power." *Current Studies in Social Psychology*, edited by I. D. Steiner and M. Fishbein, (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 371–382.

15. Dean C. Ludwig and Clinton O. Longenecker. *The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders*. *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1993, pp. 265–273. Kennesaw State University, facultyweb.kennesaw.edu/uzimmerm/docs/LudwigLongenecker%20The%20Bathsheba%20Syndrome.pdf.

Chapter 10

Applying Power to Leadership

Nothing discloses real character like the use of power. It is easy for the weak to be gentle. Most people can bear adversity. But if you wish to know what a man really is, give him power. This is the supreme test. It is the glory of Lincoln that, having almost absolute power, he never abused it, except upon the side of mercy.

–Robert Ingersoll speaking on Abraham Lincoln 1885

The orator Robert Ingersoll once captured the essence of Abraham Lincoln's character with a powerful observation: "Nearly all men can stand adversity; but if you want to know what a man's character really is, give him power." Though often misattributed to Lincoln and worded differently than Ingersoll's actual words, this idea, that power is the ultimate test of character, serves as our bridge from theory to practice. Having established what power is and the risks it entails, how do effective leaders wield it for a positive impact? The answer often lies in their chosen leadership style. We will explore seven of the most prevalent approaches: transactional, transformational, servant, charismatic, *laissez-faire*, and others, including those that are counterproductive. As we examine these frameworks, consider them not as rigid boxes but as different philosophies for inspiring action and achieving results. Which one aligns most naturally with your own personality, values, and vision for leadership?

Transactional

All leaders begin their journey with some form of transactional leadership. When subordinates follow directions simply because of rank, that is a clear expression of this style. Upon arriving at a new unit, soldiers often comply with a new leader's orders out of obligation rather than loyalty. That, too, is transactional leadership. At its core, the Army functions on a basic exchange: Soldiers receive pay and benefits in return for fulfilling duties and following lawful orders. This transaction, money for compliance, provides the structure and discipline necessary for immediate task execution, especially in large, hierarchical organizations like the military.

Transactional leaders use power primarily through legitimate, reward, and coercive means. They set clear expectations, enforce standards, and use rewards, such as recognition, time off, or advancement opportunities, to reinforce good performance. When standards are not met, they apply con-

sequences, such as counseling statements or disciplinary action, to correct behavior. This approach can be highly effective in task-oriented or high-pressure situations where consistency, accountability, and swift results are critical. However, while transactional leadership ensures short-term compliance, it rarely inspires long-term commitment. Soldiers may meet the minimum requirements, but they are unlikely to go above and beyond for a leader who relies solely on rank and authority. That's why leaders must be cautious not to remain in a transactional mindset. To build trust, loyalty, and high-performing teams, it's important to grow into more relational styles, such as transformational or servant leadership, where influence comes not just from position, but from character, competence, and care.[1]

Transformational

A transformational leader uses power not to control others, but to inspire and elevate them. This style of leadership is rooted in vision, purpose, and the ability to motivate followers to achieve more than they thought possible. Transformational leaders harness referent power (stemming from admiration, trust, and personal appeal) and expert power by earning trust through integrity, modeling high standards, and demonstrating genuine care for their team's growth. They use power to create a shared sense of mission, encouraging innovation, creativity, and ownership at every level. Rather than relying on authority alone, they empower others by aligning individual goals with a greater cause, fostering an environment where people are not just compliant, but deeply committed. In this way, power becomes a tool for transformation of individuals, teams, and entire organizations.[2] I (Robert) am always cautious when suggesting what someone "should do," but I feel confident stating every NCO in the Army should strive to become a transformational leader.

Servant

Many NCOs often debate which is more important: the accomplishment of the mission or the welfare of the Soldiers. This discussion can become passionate, with strong arguments made for prioritizing one over the other. However, such debates often miss a crucial point, mission success and Soldier welfare are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are deeply interconnected. In fact, if both exist at the same time, that's the very definition of a successful unit. Investing time and effort in caring for Soldiers does not detract from mission readiness; it enhances it. A well-cared-for Soldier is more focused, resilient, and prepared to accomplish the mission. Think about how you felt when you had a leader that put your needs before their own. That leader probably had a lot of influence over your desire to

complete difficult tasks. This synergy is the foundation of servant leadership, a philosophy that places the needs of others first while still achieving organizational goals.[3]

Servant leaders use power not to assert dominance or authority, but to support, uplift, and develop their people. Their influence is grounded in trust, respect and demonstrated competence. Rather than positioning themselves above the team, servant leaders walk alongside their Soldiers, listening actively, removing obstacles, and creating environments where individuals feel valued and empowered. Their strength lies not in command, but in service. By putting others first, they foster loyalty, build strong teams, and ultimately drive mission success, not in spite of prioritizing people, but because of it. Servant leadership transforms power from a tool of control into a force for growth and shared achievement.[4]

One thing to remember is that servant leadership does not mean abandoning your mission for the sake of your Soldiers.

> *I (Rich) remember a Squad leader that championed servant leadership to a fault resulting in the detriment of himself, his soldiers, and his unit. His soldiers felt like they could get away with anything because their leader was so worried about their feelings of being asked to work, that he never asked them.*
>
> *Instead, he tried to do everything in his squad by himself.*
>
> *This created lazy soldiers who learned cutting corners. Like a doting parent on their child, the squad leader refused to see his soldiers as anything short of perfect. One day one of his team leaders decided to cut a serious corner and gave a false report that a task was completed. The task required the Squad leader's signature on a document saying that a task was completed to standard. When it was discovered that the task was never completed, an investigation ensued. At this point, I was sure the Squad leader would recognize the issue and take actions to fix the problem.*
>
> *Instead, he threw himself upon the sword stating that it was his fault for signing the paper stating the task was complete.*
>
> *He refused to name who had told him it was complete. This eventually led to the squad leader's removal with cause. The shady team leader was put in charge of the squad. Even after all this, the Squad leader believed he had done the right thing*

and that taking the blame was how he demonstrated love to his unit.

Six months later, the new squad leader was found to have committed serious acts to include sexual harassment and forgery.

The original squad leader did not take care of his organization by taking the bullet for his Soldier.

Instead, he created an unethical unit where things like sexual harassment cultivated. The point is that while Servant leadership means standing with your team and getting things done, it should never be mistaken for Likership where the leader cares more about if their team likes them than accomplishing the mission while taking care of the Soldiers.

Charismatic

Charismatic leadership can be a highly effective leadership style. Charismatic leaders wield power through personal magnetism, emotional intelligence, and a strong ability to connect with others. Their influence is rooted primarily in referent power and rather than relying solely on rank or rewards, charismatic leaders inspire those around them through passion, vision, and confidence. They communicate with clarity and purpose, creating a sense of shared identity and mission that motivates followers to go above and beyond. Many also demonstrate expert power, earning credibility through competence and insight, and often use informational power to clearly articulate goals that resonate across the team.

When applied ethically and authentically, charismatic leadership becomes a powerful force for motivation and change. Such leaders have a unique ability to rally teams during periods of uncertainty, energize innovation, and elevate morale. This approach is particularly effective when bold vision or cultural transformation is needed. However, its effectiveness depends heavily on the leader's integrity and intent.[5] Without a strong moral compass, charisma can slip into manipulation or unethical behavior, as seen in the case of Jeffrey Skilling, former CEO of Enron, whose persuasive leadership masked fraudulent practices that led to a corporate collapse.[6] In contrast, leaders like Steve Jobs demonstrate the constructive potential of charisma. His visionary ideas, compelling communication, and commanding presence inspired intense loyalty and revolutionized the tech industry. While his style could be demanding, his charisma fostered a culture of creativity and excellence that drove Apple's lasting success.[7]

For NCOs, embracing charismatic leadership grounded in authenticity and ethical values can foster deep commitment, encourage innovation, and inspire exceptional performance within their teams. However, it's important not to confuse charismatic leadership with its ineffective counterpart, likership. While charisma motivates through respect and shared purpose, likership relies solely on being liked, often at the cost of standards, accountability, and long-term influence. True leadership is built on trust, not popularity.

Likership

Everyone likes to be liked. When leaders place themselves being liked above enforcing standards, maintaining discipline, or even accomplishing the mission, that's called Likership. You will not find likership in Army doctrine, but it exists in practice. Likership is the tendency to lead by seeking approval rather than earning respect. Unlike charismatic leadership, which is grounded in authenticity, vision, and values, likership centers on being liked, often at the expense of standards, accountability, and mission focus. Leaders who fall into the trap of likership may avoid difficult conversations, compromise discipline, or make decisions based on popularity rather than principle. While being approachable and well-liked can be assets, leadership built solely on likability is fragile and often unsustainable. For NCOs, it's critical to prioritize respect over approval, and to remember that true leadership sometimes means making the hard call, not the popular one.[8]

Likership, as a misguided leadership approach, tends to misuse or overly rely on referent power.[9] Reward power can also be misapplied, with recognition or benefits given based on favoritism rather than merit, undermining fairness and trust within the team. Additionally, likership leaders rarely develop expert or informational power, since their influence is rooted more in personal charm than professional competence or clarity of communication. This creates a fragile leadership dynamic, one that lacks the depth and structure needed for long-term effectiveness and fails to uphold the standards required for mission success.

Addressing likership begins with recognizing it as a leadership pitfall that prioritizes popularity over purpose. NCOs must understand that leadership is not a popularity contest, it's a responsibility grounded in standards, accountability, and mission success. The first step is to clarify your purpose and lead with the mission in mind. When decisions are made based on what is right rather than what is popular, Soldiers learn to respect your consistency, even if they don't always agree. Setting and enforcing standards is also critical. Leaders trapped in likership often avoid confrontation, but being

firm and fair earns lasting respect. Communicate transparently, clearly explaining your expectations and the reasoning behind your decisions. Soldiers don't have to agree with every choice, but they should understand that your actions are rooted in integrity and commitment to the team. This is the essence of the type of trust that enables mission command.[10]

The most difficult challenge in addressing likership is learning how to have difficult conversations. NCOs must embrace discomfort, when necessary, difficult conversations and honest feedback are part of the job. Avoiding them to maintain likability weakens your credibility and influence. Ultimately, the goal is to seek respect, not approval. Respect is earned through consistency, fairness, and professionalism. When you lead from your values and responsibilities, not your desire to be liked, you build trust and effectiveness that likership alone can never achieve.

A common myth that surrounds leadership is that good leaders are not liked by their Soldiers. Following my promotion to Sergeant, an old NCO offered some advice. He said, "If your Soldiers like you, you're doing something wrong." This is false. It is completely possible to be a great leader, maintain standards, have difficult conversations and still be liked. If likership is addressed in the ways previously listed, it is highly likely that your Soldiers will not only like you but respect you as well.

Laissez-faire

Laissez-faire leadership can be the ugly stepsister of likership, or it can be an effective method of leadership in formations that are highly skilled and motivated (Rangers, Special Forces, Physicians, etc.). *Laissez-faire* is a hands-off approach in which the leader provides minimal guidance and allows subordinates to make decisions and manage their own tasks. While this style can work well with highly experienced, self-motivated teams, it can also lead to confusion, lack of direction, and decreased accountability when applied inappropriately. Relying too heavily on *laissez-faire* leadership can create gaps in discipline and performance. Soldiers may lack the structure and support they require to succeed. This style should be used sparingly and only when the team can operate independently with a clear understanding of the mission and standards.[11]

Laissez-faire leadership often reflects a passive or absent use of power. NCOs who adopt this style tend to underutilize legitimate power, failing to assert the authority granted by their position. They may also neglect reward power, missing opportunities to recognize and motivate their subordinates, and avoid using coercive power, even when discipline or corrective action is necessary. Additionally, expert and infor-

mational power, which comes from knowledge and communication, are often withheld or inconsistently applied, leaving subordinates without guidance or clarity.

When NCOs use *laissez-faire* as their primary leadership style, Soldiers tend to think that their leader is above interacting with them and is too important to involve herself or himself in the daily work of the unit. I (Robert) have worked for these types of leaders before, and there were pros and cons. I'll admit it was kind of cool to not be told what they wanted me to do when they let me engage in job-crafting. The downside was they didn't see the good (or bad) work that I was doing because they really didn't care. Luckily, I only worked for two leaders like this, and I never adopted the *laissez-fair* approach.

Counterproductive

At some point in their career, nearly everyone has encountered a boss who demonstrated counterproductive leadership. For those fortunate enough to have avoided it, counterproductive leadership, formerly known as toxic leadership, is a set of behaviors long recognized as harmful and discouraged both in word and action. According to ADP 6-22, counterproductive leadership consists of actions that violate one or more of the Army's core leader competencies or Army Values. These behaviors undermine a positive command climate, damage trust, and ultimately impair mission accomplishment.[12] These behaviors can result in long-term damage to organizational morale, cohesion, effectiveness, and readiness. Although sometimes triggered by stress, high operational tempo, or chaotic conditions, counterproductive leadership tends to create toxic environments where trust deteriorates, subordinates disengage, and performance suffers. It can also feed problems of burnout, low morale, and even psychological harm to team members.

The Army identifies several broad categories of counterproductive behavior: abusive behaviors (e.g., bullying or degrading others), self-serving behaviors (e.g., taking credit for others' work), erratic behaviors (e.g., volatile or unpredictable actions), leadership incompetence (e.g., poor judgment or neglect of duties), and corrupt behaviors (e.g., violating regulations or ethical standards). Not every mistake or isolated incident qualifies as counterproductive leadership; rather, it is the recurrence or severity of negative actions that defines the behavior as harmful. The Army emphasizes the need for leaders at all levels to recognize, prevent, and correct such behaviors to uphold trust, integrity, and mission readiness across the force.[13]

In terms of power, counterproductive leadership often misuses the bases of power, relying heavily on coercive and legitimate power while neglecting the more constructive forms such as referent, expert, and informational power.[14] These leaders may enforce compliance through fear, threats, or punitive measures, creating a climate of anxiety rather than trust. They lean on their rank or position, legitimate power, as justification for their actions, rather than earning influence through competence or respect. In some cases, they may even manipulate information to maintain control, distorting informational power for personal gain. By focusing on authority and fear rather than credibility and connection, counterproductive leaders act in opposition to the scope of NCO duties and responsibilities outlined in the NCO Creed.

Despite its many potentials for pitfalls, counterproductive leadership is still acknowledged in Army doctrine as useful when applied sparingly during periods of high stress for short term gains. (It's in ADP 6-22 page 8-7 if you want to trust but verify). The same doctrine also suggests that all leaders may exhibit counterproductive leadership at times.[15] I (Robert) would argue that this mindset is dangerous. Justifying counterproductive behavior, even under pressure, risks normalizing it and blurring the line between occasional lapses and recurring harm. Leaders should strive to always uphold and model the Army Values, especially in high-stress situations, when their example matters most.

I Don't Care if It's Unethical, Just Get it Done: Why Soldiers Listen to Leaders

People listen to leaders because they are in charge. They might not be committed to the leader's directives, but they will be compliant. This is the primus behind the effectiveness of positional leadership. How do we know this? Because of a psychiatrist named Stanly Milgram and his quest to figure out why the guards at the concentration camps followed orders that were clearly amoral and, in many cases, illegal. The Milgram obedience studies, conducted in the early 1960s, are among the most famous and controversial experiments in social psychology. The studies aimed to explore how far individuals would go in obeying an authority figure, even when it meant harming another person. Participants were instructed to administer increasingly severe electric shocks to a "learner" (an actor) whenever the learner gave incorrect answers to questions. Despite the learner's simulated cries of pain and eventual silence, many participants continued to administer shocks when prompted by the authoritative experimenter. Milgram found that 65 percent of participants delivered the highest level of shock (450 volts) simply because they were told to do so by a figure in a

lab coat.[16] The results were shocking and raised profound questions about authority, morality, and personal responsibility.

Milgram's findings demonstrated that ordinary people are surprisingly willing to obey authority figures, even when doing so conflicts with their personal conscience. The studies highlighted the powerful influence of perceived legitimacy and institutional authority, what French and Raven would describe as legitimate power, in shaping behavior.[17] The implications of Milgram's work is especially relevant in military and organizational contexts, where obedience is essential but must be balanced by ethical judgment and moral courage. His research serves as a cautionary tale, showing that blind obedience to authority can lead to harmful or immoral outcomes if not guided by strong ethical leadership. This should scare you. Milgram conducted his experiments many times in many different contexts, and the results were all identical. Most people will follow unethical orders from people who they believe are in a position of power. For NCOs and other leaders, the study reinforces the importance of cultivating critical thinking, personal accountability, and a culture where questioning unethical orders is not only allowed but expected. Remember, questioning does not equal disrespect, but rather a sign of subordinates seeking to understand.

Another study that investigated how individuals would follow unethical orders was the work of Freedman and Fraser and their "foot in the door phenomenon.[18] The basic principle is that it can become easy to manipulate another person to do the wrong thing by making small and what seem like inconsequential requests from a person in charge. With every act of compliance, a bigger task is made. Because the distance between the last task and the new one is so small, the person being asked does not see the true size of what is being asked. This technique is used in car sales when the last person (the finance and insurance manager) starts walking you through all the additional protections you can get. A hundred here for interior coating, a hundred there for a special kind of tire shine. And we cannot forget about that Gap insurance! Before you know it, you have agreed to between five to ten thousand extra dollars in things you never needed. This technique can also be used to get Soldiers to accept or do the wrong thing as well. Overlook this one infraction, have mercy on that Soldier with a DUI. After all, they have the top AFT score in the Company. Maybe ignore the fact that the First Sergeant is constantly yelling at that one Soldier and making it personal. Before you know it, the unit is in shambles, and the climate is destroyed. In life, it's ok to not sweat little things. In leadership, there are no little things that should be ignored.

Nothing Around Here Ever Changes: Learned Helplessness

Learned helplessness is a psychological condition in which individuals come to believe they have no control over their circumstances, even when opportunities for change or improvement exist. This mindset often develops after repeated exposure to negative or uncontrollable situations where efforts to succeed or escape failure have been met with consistent defeat. Over time, individuals may stop trying altogether, assuming that their actions are futile. Originally studied by psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman in experiments with animals, learned helplessness has since been recognized in humans, particularly in contexts involving chronic stress, poor leadership, or environments where autonomy and recognition are lacking.[19]

I (Robert) have felt this way at times when speaking to HRC. This is not a knock on HRC's leadership or communications abilities, it's just that I never seemed to communicate well with them, and I learned, whether right or wrong, that they had better things to do. I assure you I was wrong in this, but sometimes it is hard to shake learned helplessness, but it can be shaken.

For NCOs, understanding learned helplessness is critical because it directly affects morale, motivation, and unit performance. Soldiers who feel that their efforts don't matter, whether due to counterproductive leadership, lack of recognition, or consistently unattainable expectations, may disengage, stop taking initiative, or become passive in the face of adversity. This can erode discipline, teamwork, and mission readiness. If your Soldiers are not talking with you or never offer suggestions, they may be suffering from learned helplessness. In Army units, NCOs play a key role in preventing this by fostering a climate of trust, empowerment, and support. By setting realistic goals, recognizing effort, providing meaningful feedback, actively listening to concerns, and giving Soldiers a sense of ownership over their work, NCOs can combat the effects of learned helplessness and cultivate a resilient, confident, and mission-focused team.

I Can Make A Difference: Learned Optimism

If people can learn helplessness, why can't they also learn optimism? According to psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman, the same researcher who pioneered the study of learned helplessness, they absolutely can. Learned optimism is the idea that individuals can train themselves to respond to adversity with a more positive and resilient mindset. This concept became the foundation of the Army's Resiliency Program, which aims to strengthen Soldiers' mental toughness and adaptability. Unlike blind positivity, learned optimism does not ignore hardship; instead, it encourages people to acknowledge negative events without becoming overwhelmed, and to

interpret setbacks as temporary, specific, and changeable rather than permanent or personal.

Seligman's research demonstrated that those who consistently practice optimistic thinking are more likely to persevere through challenges, perform better under pressure, and maintain better mental and physical health. This mindset enhances not only individual well-being but also team cohesion and performance. Perhaps most importantly, optimism is not viewed as an inborn personality trait, it is a skill that can be developed through deliberate reflection, training, and habits. For Soldiers and leaders alike, learned optimism offers a practical, science-based approach to facing adversity with strength, purpose, and hope.[20]

Learned optimism is a powerful concept for both personal resilience and effective leadership that NCOs should understand. Military service often involves hardship, uncertainty, and stress, conditions that can wear down even the most capable Soldiers. NCOs who practice learned optimism are better equipped to stay mission-focused, recover from setbacks, and maintain their composure in difficult situations. Their ability to reframe adversity not only keeps them grounded but also influences their team. Soldiers look to their NCOs for emotional cues; when leaders demonstrate realistic hope and forward thinking, it encourages the same mindset in the formation. This has a direct impact on morale, cohesion, and the ability to adapt to complex or high-stress environments.

Moreover, NCOs can teach learned optimism to their Soldiers by modeling it and incorporating it into mentorship and training. It's kind of eerie how doing the right thing and modeling ethical leadership principles keeps coming up. Encouraging Soldiers to reframe failure as an opportunity for growth, or to view temporary setbacks as part of a larger learning process, builds mental toughness and reduces the risk of burnout or disengagement. It also fosters a culture of accountability and continuous improvement, where individuals feel empowered to overcome challenges rather than be defined by them. In an Army that values resilience, adaptability, and mission readiness, learned optimism is not just a personal asset, it's a leadership multiplier that strengthens the entire unit.

I am Acting Like an NCO Should Act: The Stanford Prison Experiment

The Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted by psychologist Philip Zimbardo in 1971, was a landmark study designed to examine the psychological effects of perceived power in a simulated prison environment. College students were randomly assigned to play the roles of guards or prisoners in a mock prison set up in the basement of Stanford

University. The experiment was intended to last two weeks but was abruptly terminated after just six days due to the extreme and disturbing behavior that emerged. The "guards" began to exhibit abusive, authoritarian behaviors, while the "prisoners" showed signs of emotional distress, passivity, and helplessness. Despite knowing it was a simulation, participants internalized their roles with alarming speed, leading to real psychological consequences.

What the Stanford Prison Experiment revealed is the profound influence of situational factors and assigned roles on human behavior. The study demonstrated how easily people can adopt harmful behaviors when placed in positions of unchecked authority, especially in environments lacking accountability or ethical guidance. It also showed how quickly individuals in subordinate roles may become submissive or psychologically damaged when subjected to dehumanizing treatment.[21] When I (Robert) was in basic training, I served in the role of the Platoon Guide. I was 18, new to the Army, and my only model of leadership was my drill sergeant. How do you think I acted? If you said I acted like my drill sergeant, you would be right.

The lessons from the Stanford Prison Experiment are especially relevant for young leaders. As frontline leaders responsible for enforcing standards, maintaining discipline, and caring for Soldiers, NCOs must understand the potential for power to corrupt and for vulnerable individuals to be harmed by counterproductive climates. It is important to set an example and provide ethical leadership, be self-aware, and work to build a strong command climate where dignity and respect are non-negotiable. Soldiers are always watching you and will model the behavior you display. NCOs must ensure that authority is exercised with humility and integrity, that roles and expectations are clearly defined and monitored, and that Soldiers feel safe, valued, and supported. By understanding how environments can shape behavior, for better or worse, NCOs can prevent the abuse of authority, promote professionalism, and safeguard the psychological well-being of their teams.

If You Are Not One of Us, You Are One of Them: The Robbers Cave Experiment

The Robbers Cave Experiment, often referred to as the "Boy Scout Experiment," was conducted by psychologist Muzafer Sherif in 1954 to study intergroup conflict and cooperation. In this study, 22 boys were brought to a summer camp under the impression they were simply going on a retreat. Unbeknownst to them, the researchers divided them into two groups and kept them separate for the first phase of the experiment. During this time, each group bonded internally, developing its own identity, name,

and leadership structure. Does this sound like anywhere you might work? In the second phase, the groups were introduced and placed in direct competition through a series of games and challenges. Hostility quickly escalated, name-calling, vandalism, and physical altercations occurred, despite the boys having had no previous conflicts. Only after introducing shared goals that required cooperation between the groups did the tension subside and teamwork begin to form.

The Robbers Cave Experiment demonstrated the powerful psychological pull of in-group versus out-group dynamics. When people identify strongly with a group, they are more likely to show favoritism toward their own members and hostility toward outsiders. The study also revealed that competition over limited resources can intensify these divisions, leading to conflict, aggression, and entrenched biases, even among those with similar backgrounds and values. However, it also showed that intergroup hostility can be reduced when both groups are required to work together toward a common goal, emphasizing the importance of unity, communication, and shared purpose.[22]

Understanding the implications of the Robbers Cave Experiment is essential to building cohesive teams in diverse and high-pressure environments. Units are often composed of individuals from various backgrounds, MOSs, and belief systems, and cliques or rivalries can form easily if not actively managed. If left unchecked, in-group favoritism and out-group exclusion can lead to toxic subcultures, degraded morale, and diminished unit effectiveness. NCOs must foster inclusive environments where shared goals outweigh personal or group divisions. Encouraging collaboration, emphasizing the mission, and recognizing every Soldier's contribution helps dissolve barriers and reinforces unity. By understanding how group dynamics work, NCOs can preempt conflict and strengthen cohesion within their formations.

It also bears mentioning that NCOs should never engage in "trash talk" or pass judgment on other formations. As the saying goes, you cannot truly understand someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes. Without knowing the challenges other units are facing or the progress they've made, it is both unfair and unproductive to make comparisons. Instead, NCOs should focus on fostering mutual respect and cooperation, working to overcome in-group and out-group dynamics that can undermine cohesion across the larger organization. Unless it is at the Army-Navy football game.

I Had No Choice, I Yelled at You Because You Were Late: Stimulus and Response

Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, explored the depths of human suffering and resilience in his groundbreaking book

Man's Search for Meaning. One of his most profound insights is that while we cannot always control our circumstances, we can always choose our response to them. He wrote, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms, to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."[23] Frankl developed this philosophy while enduring unimaginable hardship in Nazi concentration camps, where he observed that those who maintained a sense of purpose and inner control were more likely to survive. His belief in the power of personal agency, that we always have the ability to control our inner world, even when the outer world collapses, is a cornerstone of modern existential psychology.[24]

For NCOs, Frankl's insights offer an essential leadership lesson: self-control is not only a personal strength but a professional responsibility. In high-stress environments, Soldiers look to their leaders not just for orders, but for emotional cues and moral grounding. An NCO who maintains composure, perspective, and integrity during adversity reinforces stability and trust within the unit. Frankl's teachings remind NCOs that even in the face of chaos or frustration, they have the power to choose patience, courage, and compassion over anger or impulsiveness. In this space between stimulus and response is where good leaders become great ones.

Moreover, understanding Frankl's philosophy equips NCOs to mentor their Soldiers through personal and professional challenges. Life in the military is filled with moments where control is limited, orders are given, conditions change, and setbacks occur. But when NCOs model and teach the idea that meaning can be found in service, sacrifice, and perseverance, they help Soldiers develop resilience. By embracing Frankl's belief in the power of self-determination, NCOs can foster a culture of personal accountability and emotional strength, two qualities vital to mission success and long-term well-being in any organization.

I Want Results, and I Want Them Now: The Marshmallow Test

The Marshmallow Test, a famous psychological experiment conducted by Walter Mischel in the late 1960s and 1970s, explored the concept of delayed gratification in young children. In the study, children were given a choice: they could eat one marshmallow immediately or wait a short period and receive two marshmallows instead. Follow-up studies showed that children who were able to delay gratification tended to have better outcomes later in life, including higher academic achievement, better emotional regulation, and more stable relationships. The core takeaway is that the ability to delay short-term rewards in pursuit of greater long-term gains is a critical predictor of personal and professional success.[25]

Great NCOs know that the principle of delayed gratification is highly relevant both in leadership and personal development. Military life is full of opportunities where immediate desires must be set aside for the sake of long-term goals, whether it's enduring a difficult training cycle to build readiness, postponing personal comfort for team success, or investing time in mentoring a struggling Soldier. If you are struggling to find an Army concept related to delayed gratification, think about those Soldiers who are going to school in the evenings rather than going out, or those who spend additional time at the gym to improve their readiness. NCOs who consistently model delayed gratification show their teams that discipline, and patience are marks of maturity and leadership. By doing so, they also help cultivate a mindset among Soldiers that values long-term mission success over short-term comfort or recognition.

Furthermore, understanding and teaching delayed gratification can play a powerful role in shaping resilient, forward-thinking Soldiers. In an era of instant gratification and constant distraction, helping individuals develop the discipline to stay focused, set goals, and wait for meaningful results is more valuable than ever. NCOs can use real-world examples, like saving for future opportunities, investing in education, or training for career progression, to show how delayed gratification pays off over time. By reinforcing these habits within their formations, NCOs help build not only better Soldiers but more capable, responsible, and future-ready leaders.

Mindreading Does Not Work: The Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind is the psychological concept that refers to an individual's ability to understand that others have thoughts, feelings, beliefs, desires, and perspectives different from their own. This cognitive skill typically begins developing in early childhood and is fundamental to empathy, communication, and social interaction. Theory of Mind allows us to predict and interpret the behavior of others by recognizing their mental states, even when those states differ from reality. It is the foundation for understanding motives, intentions, and emotional responses in complex social situations, making it essential for effective leadership and team dynamics.[26]

For NCOs, a well-developed Theory of Mind is a critical tool in building trust, resolving conflict, and fostering cohesion. The ability to recognize what a Soldier may be thinking or feeling, even when it is unspoken, can help a leader respond with empathy, guide more effective communication, and anticipate challenges before they escalate. Whether it's understanding why a Soldier may be underperforming, anticipating how a



Figure 10.1. Applying Power to Leadership. Dale Cordes, untitled, 2026, graphite on paper, Lawrence, Kansas.

team might react to a new policy, or navigating the emotional impact of personal hardships, Theory of Mind enables NCOs to lead with emotional intelligence and tact. This insight is especially valuable in diverse formations, where experiences and perspectives vary widely.

In addition, teaching and modeling Theory of Mind can help strengthen the overall emotional intelligence of a unit. By encouraging Soldiers to consider how their words and actions affect others, NCOs promote empathy, mutual respect, and more thoughtful decision-making. This is not only important for maintaining morale and discipline but also for cultivat-

ing a culture where team members support each other, especially in high-stress or high-stakes environments. Understanding Theory of Mind equips NCOs to lead not just through authority, but through connection, emotional awareness, and shared understanding, qualities that are essential in both garrison and combat environments.

Another place where Theory of mind is especially powerful is in the Commander/NCO relationship. NCOs are introduced to this dynamic around the time they put on Sergeant First Class. Suddenly, they are reduced from being the leader of their unit, to being the advisor for an Officer counterpart. Many NCOs do not handle this abrupt change in dynamics well. It is all too common to see a Sergeant First Class mock or belittle their 2nd Lieutenant counterpart. This is absolutely the wrong move. Not only does the NCO miss a golden opportunity to begin to understand the new dynamic that will be constant throughout the rest of their career, but they also create resentment within the Platoon Leader. This resentment can help explain why so many Officers disregard NCO input later in their careers. The Platoon Sergeant should make the attempt to understand their Platoon Leader and recognize that the Lieutenant's motivators and character may be very different from theirs. By recognizing this and starting with the common ground of mission success and the welfare of the platoon, the Platoon Sergeant is better able to do what they are there to do, mentor the young Lieutenant and ensure that they are successful in their first command. Working on this at the Platoon level will pay dividends for the NCO at the First Sergeant and Command Sergeant Major levels. They will have learned to recognize their Officer counterpart's needs, moods, and beliefs and will be better able to advise them in a meaningful way on matters of importance.

I'm Not Qualified for This Position: Impostor Syndrome

Have you ever felt like you were not good enough to be in a certain job or position? If so, you are like most of us, and that feeling is known as imposter syndrome. Impostor syndrome is a psychological pattern in which individuals doubt their accomplishments and fear being exposed as a "fraud," even when there is clear evidence of their competence and success. People experiencing impostor syndrome often attribute achievements to luck, timing, or the help of others, rather than their own skill or effort. They may constantly feel as though they don't belong or haven't earned their place, despite external validation. This internal struggle is surprisingly common, affecting high achievers across all professions, including military leaders, who quietly carry self-doubt while appearing confident on the outside.[27]

Understanding impostor syndrome is important both for personal development and for leading others effectively. Leaders who experience

these feelings may hesitate to take initiative, avoid opportunities, or undermine their own authority by overcompensating or seeking constant reassurance. On the other hand, NCOs who recognize impostor syndrome for what it is, a distortion of self-perception, can begin to challenge those thoughts and grow more confident in their role. Just as importantly, by understanding this phenomenon, NCOs are better equipped to recognize it in their Soldiers. They can offer support, reinforce individual strengths, and create a climate where honest conversations about confidence and self-worth are not only accepted, but encouraged. In a profession that demands both competence and composure, addressing impostor syndrome helps ensure that capable individuals are not held back by their own self-doubt.

I (Rich) have struggled with imposter syndrome for most of my career and can tell you that when you let yourself be in that state of mind, it can impact your career.

I once went to selection for a specialized unit. During my time in selection, I was tested mentally and physically. The entire time I did not know if I was doing well or not and I felt that if I assumed that I did good on something, then it would be egotistic.

Instead, I ridiculed everything I did.

During the selection time, several other candidates were asked to leave before the selection was over. I kept assuming that I would be the next to go, but I never was. At the very end of selection, those that were left had to go in front of a panel who would ask questions about the selection process and make the final decision on whether someone was accepted or not.

All I could do while waiting to go in was to think about everything I must have got wrong.

We were never given any feedback on our performance, so I filled that void of knowledge with elaborate stories of how I must have been the worst candidate they had ever seen. By the time I went in front of the panel, I was already defeated. Every question they asked about why I did something I started by apologizing on how wrong it was. I lamented my poor performance and exalted the organization, basically telling them how unworthy I was. This became self-fulfilling prophecy, and I was asked not to join.

Looking back at it, it was like something out of a tragic comedy with the protagonist constantly demonstrating a complete lack of self-esteem. Interestingly, I was afforded another op-

portunity to join that organization later on and made it. Once in, I was able to see some of my original selection evaluations.

While I was not the absolute best, I was good. Good enough in fact to make it to the end of a process that only a few make it through.

One of the few regrets I truly have in my career was lampooning myself in that board. I often wonder what my career would have been like if I had made it through that process the first time. It wasn't the mental agility or physical ability that stopped me, it was my imposter syndrome and low self-worth. The lesson here is that while hubris is a terrible trait in a leader, so is low self-esteem.

The Accomplishment of My Mission and The Welfare of My Soldiers; Both/And Thinking

Both/And Thinking is a cognitive approach that encourages individuals to hold and navigate multiple, seemingly conflicting truths at the same time. Rather than being constrained by the limits of either/or thinking, where one must choose between two opposing options, both/and thinking allows leaders to recognize complexity, balance competing priorities, and arrive at more nuanced solutions. This mindset is especially useful in dynamic environments like the military, where challenges are rarely black and white. For example, a leader can prioritize both mission success and Soldier welfare; these values are not mutually exclusive, but rather interconnected components of effective leadership.[28]

Practicing both/and thinking is essential to navigating the tensions and tradeoffs that come with responsibility. Too often, junior leaders feel pressured to choose between discipline or empathy, standards or flexibility, authority or approachability. In reality, strong leadership often requires holding both at once, maintaining high expectations and showing compassion, enforcing rules and understanding personal challenges. It is completely possible to do two things at once. Both/and thinking helps NCOs lead with balance, adaptability, and wisdom, especially in diverse units where perspectives, needs, and goals may differ. By modeling this approach, NCOs can also help their Soldiers think more critically and make sound decisions in complex situations, enhancing overall resilience and mission effectiveness.

Tying it Together

In this chapter we discussed a lot of psychological studies on human behavior and how they can apply to the military leader. This is intentional

to demonstrate the wealth of knowledge that is out there beyond what Army regulations offer. It is good practice for any new NCO to first study the regs to understand what the Army expects of them, but that leader should not stop learning when the regulation is finished. Psychology has studied how to shape behavior and drive actions towards desired outcomes, and this chapter only scrapes the surface of all the information that is out there. We strongly suggest that all military leaders strive to be a lifelong learner and to add some behavioral psychology to their career curriculum.

It doesn't matter if a leader chooses to add reading in their spare time, taking college classes, or even just researching the areas of leadership, behavior, and learning, the important thing is that the leader continues to learn how to be more effective. I (Richard) would gladly exchange a few of my personal experiences learning lessons the hard way that I have shared in this book for a couple of chapters or lessons on how I could have handled those situations better. Read, listen, learn, and apply what you learn. I can guarantee that it will make any military leaders' life easier.

Questions for Discussion

- **Power and Leadership Styles**

  The chapter explains that leadership styles reflect how leaders apply power and influence. How does understanding your personal leadership style help you use power more responsibly and effectively?

- **Transactional Leadership**

  Transactional leadership relies on rewards, punishment, and clearly defined expectations. When is this approach most effective in a military unit, and when might it limit initiative or innovation?

- **Transactional Leadership and Discipline**

  The chapter notes that transactional leadership often focuses on compliance and standards. How can leaders enforce standards without becoming overly reliant on authority or punishmen?

- **Transformational Leadership**

  Transformational leaders motivate people by connecting them to a larger purpose. How can NCOs help Soldiers see the importance of their work beyond simply completing tasks?

- **Transformational Leadership and Motivation**

  According to the chapter, transformational leadership can inspire followers to exceed expectations. What behaviors or actions from leaders tend to inspire that level of commitment?

- **Servant Leadership**

  Servant leadership focuses on developing and supporting subordinates. What are practical ways NCOs can demonstrate servant leadership while still maintaining authority and accountability?

- **Servant Leadership and Balance**

  The chapter describes a squad leader who worked late to cover for a struggling Soldier. When does helping subordinates become counterproductive to their development?

- **Charismatic Leadership**

  Charismatic leaders can strongly influence others through personality and presence. What are the advantages and potential risks of relying on charisma as a leadership tool?

- **Likership vs Leadership**

  The chapter warns against "likership," where leaders prioritize being liked over enforcing standards. What are the long-term consequences for a team when leaders avoid difficult conversations?

Recommended Further Reading

"Emotional Intelligence," by 1st Sgt. Richard Cole, *The NCO Journal*, February 2018.

"The Psychological Intangibles of Soldier Readiness, Part 1: The Concept," by Dr. Christopher Vowels and Dr. Steven Aude, *The NCO Journal*, November 2019.

"The Psychological Intangibles of Soldier Readiness, Part 2: Concept Criticality and Training," by Dr. Christopher Vowels and Dr. Steven Aude, *The NCO Journal*, December 2019.

"The Psychological Intangibles of Soldier Readiness, Part 3: Intangible Measures Development and Field Test," by Dr. Christopher Vowels and Dr. Steven Aude, *The NCO Journal*, December 2019.

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Chapter 11

Stewards of the Profession

Stewardship of the Army profession demands that we develop leaders who not only excel in skill and character but also carry forward the trust, values, and legacy that define our service to the nation.

–ADP 1*, The Army Profession*[1]

When I (Robert) joined the Army in 1993, it was a way to pay for college and to obtain a better life, not to become a professional soldier. As time passed and the months became years, the concept of what it meant to be a professional changed; not in the Army, but in myself. Although I am now retired, I am still part of the profession of arms, and if you are reading this, chances are that you are too. If you have never thought of what it really means to be a professional, ADP 6-22 describes it extremely well.

The Profession of Arms refers to the disciplined, skilled, and ethically grounded service of military personnel who are entrusted with the defense of their nation. In the U.S. Army, this concept encompasses more than just engaging in combat; it involves a deep commitment to a higher calling rooted in values, professional expertise, and a continuous effort to earn and maintain the trust of the American people. The Army is considered a profession because it possesses a specialized body of knowledge in areas such as leadership, the management of violence, strategic planning, and operations. Soldiers undergo extensive training and education throughout their careers to develop and refine this expertise.

Another key reason the Army is considered a profession is the immense trust placed in it by society. The Army is granted the authority to use lethal force on behalf of the nation, which requires it to operate with the highest standards of ethical conduct. Soldiers are bound by the Army Values. Loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage guide behaviors both in and out of uniform. The Army also demonstrates stewardship by preparing the next generation of leaders, preserving institutional standards, and investing in its long-term effectiveness.

Furthermore, the Army exercises a degree of self-regulation uncommon in most occupations. It maintains its own system of training, discipline, and professional development, which helps create a strong sense of identity and responsibility among its members. These qualities distinguish the Army from a typical job or career and define it as a true profession committed to serving the nation with honor and excellence.[2]

The Army Ethic

The military profession is built on trust, character, and a shared commitment to something greater than ourselves. At the heart is the Army Ethic, the moral foundation that guides soldiers and Army civilians on how to think, act, and serve. Like any genuine profession, the Army relies on a set of personal and institutional standards that define what it means to be a professional. These standards are not just rules to follow but deeply held beliefs and values that create a shared sense of purpose and identity among those who wear the uniform. The Army Ethic is a commitment to something larger than ourselves. This concept highlights one of our key responsibilities as NCOs; we must lead in a way that encourages the growth of the Army Ethic within our soldiers. This is important because, like me (Robert), many people join the Army for reasons other than to become professional.

The Army Ethic consists of enduring principles, values, beliefs, and laws that influence everything soldiers and Army civilians do. It shapes decisions in combat and in daily life, sets expectations for leadership and conduct, and reminds every Army professional of their responsibility to serve with honor and integrity. Rooted in love of country, dedication to peace, and a deep sense of duty to the American people, the ethic calls on everyone to support and defend the Constitution and live by the Army Values.

These values are more than words; they define the character of the Army and build the trust that is essential to its relationship with the nation. Trust is not given, it is earned, through consistent, ethical action and a clear commitment to excellence. It forms the foundation of the Army's legitimacy and is reinforced every time a soldier leads with courage, makes the right choice in a tough moment, or puts the needs of others ahead of their own.

The Army Ethic doesn't just influence individuals; it also guides the institution. It shapes policies, decisions, and actions at every level, ensuring that land-power is developed, supported, and applied ethically and responsibly under civilian authority. This reflects the Army's role as a servant of the people, one that honors the principles laid out in the Constitution. The ethic is a constant reminder that every mission, no matter how small or large, is carried out on behalf of the American people.

The roots of the Army Ethic run deep, drawn from the philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions that shaped our nation. These traditions emphasize justice, peace, defense, and liberty, all principles that soldiers and Army civilians affirm through their oath of service. The Army's motto, "This We'll Defend," captures this unwavering commitment to protecting what matters most.[3]

Soldiers and Army civilians come to the profession with their own story, shaped by their upbringing, culture, and experiences. This diversity is one of the Army's greatest strengths. But despite different backgrounds, everyone who joins takes the same oath, pledging to live by the Army Ethic, and in doing so becomes a physical representation of the words on the Great Seal of the United States, *E pluribus unum*, "out of many, one."[4] This shared commitment unites the force in a common moral purpose. It is this bond, rooted in trust, values, and service, that makes the Army not just a team, but a true profession of arms.[5]

The Characteristics of the Profession

The Army profession is founded on a set of core characteristics that define its identity and guide the conduct of its members. Central to this profession is trust, the essential bond between soldiers, leaders, and the nation they serve, built through consistent honesty, integrity, and reliability. Alongside trust is the concept of honorable service, or embodying a commitment to ethical behavior, respect for others, and dedication to the mission above self-interest. Equally important is military expertise, the mastery of skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to accomplish complex and often dangerous tasks effectively. Finally, stewardship reflects the responsibility to preserve and strengthen the Army's values, capabilities, and resources for future generations, ensuring the profession's enduring strength and relevance. Together, these characteristics form the foundation of what it means to be a professional soldier in the United States Army.[6]

Trust

Like communication, trust is one of those intangible things that is so important that it weaves itself into the very fabric of the Army. You will never read a book on leadership that doesn't mention communication and trust multiple times. In the case of trust, it is the bedrock of the Army Profession. It is not an Army Value, but a defining characteristic that enables cohesive teams, mission success, and enduring relationships between soldiers, leaders, and the American people. According to ADP 6-22, trust is developed through consistent demonstration of competence, character, and commitment. In the Army, trust flows in multiple directions: soldiers must trust their leaders to act ethically and in their best interest; leaders must trust their soldiers to execute tasks with discipline and integrity; and both must earn the trust of the public they serve.[7] Without trust, orders become hollow, cohesion breaks down, and the Army's ability to operate as a professional, values-based organization is compromised.

Building trust within a unit requires deliberate and sustained effort. You must plan it out. Trust does not happen by accident. Leaders must lead by example, communicate honestly, and show empathy and consistency in their decisions. As mentioned in chapters four and eight, trust grows when leaders underwrite honest mistakes, recognize individual contributions, and treat every soldier with dignity and respect. Its growth also depends on transparency, being clear about expectations, following through on promises, and admitting when you're wrong. Simple actions, like knowing your soldiers' names, listening to their concerns, and standing with them during hardship, send a powerful message: "You matter. I've got your back." In this way, trust becomes a currency that strengthens discipline, builds morale, and fosters a culture of mutual respect that will carry units through the most demanding missions.

Honorable Service

Honorable service is a core characteristic of the Army Profession and a direct reflection of a soldier's commitment to uphold the Constitution, the Army Values, and the moral principles that guide military service. As defined in ADP 6-22, honorable service is more than simply doing what is legal or expected, it is about doing what is right, even when it is difficult or unpopular.[8] One of my favorite quotes about integrity is from Dwight D. Eisenhower who said "The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office."[9] Soldiers cannot serve honorably without integrity. Soldiers and leaders who serve honorably place duty, integrity, and selfless service above personal gain or recognition. This commitment to ethical conduct fosters trust within the unit and with the American people, reinforcing the legitimacy and credibility of the Army as a professional institution.

Building a culture of honorable service starts with leaders who consistently model ethical behavior and hold themselves accountable. NCOs play a vital role in this effort by setting the example, maintaining standards, and creating an environment where soldiers feel empowered to do the right thing. Honorable service is reinforced through honest communication, fair treatment, and the recognition of those who demonstrate integrity in action. It also requires moral courage, the willingness to speak up against wrongdoing, to protect those who cannot protect themselves, and to stay true to Army Values even when no one is watching. When leaders embody honorable service, they not only shape individual character but also elevate the entire unit, ensuring that every mission is approached with purpose, pride, and professionalism.

Military Expertise

Military expertise is one of the essential characteristics of the Army Profession. It refers to the specialized knowledge, skills, and judgment required to ethically and effectively apply land-power in defense of the nation. As outlined in ADP 6-22*,* military expertise is more than tactical and technical proficiency, it also includes a deep understanding of the moral and ethical responsibilities that come with the use of force.[10] The Army relies on its professionals to exercise sound judgment, adapt to complex environments, and continually develop their craft through education, training, and experience. Without military expertise, the Army cannot be trusted to accomplish its missions or protect the rights and freedoms of the American people.

Developing and maintaining military expertise is a continuous process, and NCOs play a central role in that effort. Through mentorship, rigorous training, and leading by example, NCOs help soldiers sharpen their warfighting skills and deepen their understanding of doctrine, tactics, and the operational environment. Expertise also involves self-awareness, knowing when to rely on others, when to seek guidance, and when to challenge outdated methods. NCOs must encourage a culture of lifelong learning, where asking questions and pursuing mastery are signs of strength, not weakness. In doing so, they ensure that their units remain adaptive, capable, and ready for the challenges of future conflict, upholding the Army's reputation as a professional force worthy of the nation's trust.

Stewardship of the Profession

If everyone in the Army is a professional who embodies the Army Ethic, the Army should be a perfect organization in which to serve. Unfortunately, some soldiers and civilians are ***in*** the profession, but not ***a part of*** it. Not everyone joins the Army to be a professional soldier and it takes time to adopt, and more importantly, believe in the Army Ethic.[11] People are imperfect and constantly evolving beings, all of us possessing varying levels of control over the impulse and impacts of "what is in it for me" (WIIFM) Syndrome. When given power and left unchecked, one's WIFFM instinct acts in ways that conflict with the Army Ethic and the profession of arms. For these reasons, those who have bought into the profession are charged with its stewardship.[12]

Stewardship and Combat Effectiveness

Yet another reason to steward the profession is that it directly improves combat effectiveness. Maintaining professional standards and building the

capabilities the Army will require in the future protects the very conditions that let units fight, adapt, and win.[13] In practice, leaders develop themselves and their people, enforce standards, model the Army Ethic, and cultivate a climate where trust and accountability thrive. Those behaviors pay off in combat: shared professional identity and ethical clarity reduce friction, speed decision making, and prevent corrosive shortcuts that undermine the team. When soldiers trust their leaders to do the right thing and to invest in their growth, they are more likely to exercise disciplined initiative, communicate candidly, and synchronize efforts under stress. By treating leader development, ethics, and standards as readiness tasks, stewards turn character and competence into combat multipliers.

Mission command translates stewardship into battlefield performance. Research and doctrine emphasize that cohesive teams built on mutual trust enable decentralized execution, faster decisions, and agile adaptation, advantages that accumulate at every echelon in complex, contested environments. Leaders who consciously set the conditions for trust, purpose, and learning see subordinates anticipate intent, solve problems locally, and coordinate laterally without waiting for permission, which shortens the kill chain and widens the decision advantage.[14] Conversely, neglecting stewardship erodes climate, silences initiative, and forces headquarters to over-control, slowing operations and inviting failure. In short, stewarding the profession is a combat multiplier that turns values and expertise into reliable effects during times of high stress.

What to Do When it is Hard to Steward the Profession

Stewardship of the Army profession demands channeling dissent constructively and pivoting toward execution with unwavering professionalism. This means recognizing that obedience to lawful orders is foundational to military discipline, but it doesn't require blind compliance. It calls for moral autonomy, where leaders exercise sound judgment, consult mentors if an ethical dilemma arises, and use tools like mission command to empower teams. For instance, rather than "slow-rolling" an order (which erodes trust and integrity), professionals clarify the commander's intent, break down tasks into clear objectives, and encourage disciplined initiative among subordinates to achieve the end-state efficiently. This approach not only gets things done but also stewards the profession by developing others through experiential learning, balancing mission priorities with soldier welfare, and investing in long-term organizational health. Potential frictions transform into opportunities for growth, reinforcing values like selfless service and moral courage while accomplishing the mission the right way.

Temptation to Take a Shortcut

The Easy Wrong vs the Hard Right

Sometimes a NCO finds themselves in a position where they are needed to decide the best course of action. When soldiers learn to clear a room, it is given that the first person in should take the path of least resistance. While this advice is good for MOUNT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) it is terrible advice for stewarding the profession. Being professional means doing what is right even at the expense of ourselves. Sometimes doing what is right can have uncomfortable consequences like when needing to report a missing sensitive item to higher or letting someone know about you or one of your team messing up something important. Ethical service is not about doing what is right only when it is comfortable. In the end it is about taking the hard right (professionalism) versus the easy wrong (personal).

> *I (Rich) faced this many times in my career. One instance that stands out to me happened while in recruiting command. As a recruiter, I had a recruit who found themselves in hot water. They lived at home with their parents and the whole family was excited about them leaving for Basic Training the following week. Then, on a Monday night, the father went into the recruit's room to put away some laundry. When he did, he found a large stash of drugs in the recruit's room. The dad called his son home and confronted him. The recruit admitted to both selling and using the drugs on a regular basis. The father did not call the police. Instead, he threw out all the drugs and drove his son straight to a rehab clinic. The next day the father phoned me and told me what happened. Needless to say, a recruit cannot go to basic training if they are struggling with addiction of illegal substances. I phoned my recruiting First Sergeant and told him we were going to take a loss (a person who has signed all the contracts, but ends up not leaving for basic and their contract is voided). The First Sergeant listened to me explain everything and then paused. After about a minute of silence, the First Sergeant asked "So the dad didn't tell the police?" I told him they did not. Then the First Sergeant said something that has stayed with me all these years.*
>
> *"You know, basic training is pretty much just like a rehab clinic. The privates are in a controlled setting with lots of things to do to keep their minds off drugs. It seems like the best thing*

we could do is quietly pull him out of that rehab and ship him off. It probably would be much better for him in the long run."

I was baffled. In recruiting, there is pressure to make the recruiting mission, but we have always been asked to do it with integrity. This was a complete lack of integrity by my immediate supervisor. It would have been easy to do exactly what my First Sergeant had hinted. I couldn't bring myself to act in such a way. It would have completely ignored the Army values. I told the First Sergeant in no uncertain terms that I would not put an addict through Basic Training instead of rehab. I went on to suggest that if the recruit were to arrive at MEPS on the day of him shipping, I would go straight to the Battalion Command team and let them know where he belonged instead of in Basic Training.

I received a long lecture by my First Sergeant on how I was lacking in several Army Values including Loyalty, Duty, and Respect for my chain of command. The result was that the recruit never went to basic, the station took a loss, and my NCOER had me marked with a 2 and 3 out of five for performance and potential. I was marked "Fully Capable" instead of being marked "Among the Best." When I asked about these low marks on my evaluation, the First Sergeant told me, "You're just not a team player." After that, whenever I needed to decide how best to steward the profession, I would ask myself "What would that First Sergeant do?" and then do the opposite.

Talent Management: Get This Right or Suffer the Consequences

If you are paying attention, you probably noticed that talent management is not a core characteristic of the Army Profession according to Army Doctrine. However, talent management is a critical task under the broader concept of stewardship within the Army profession, focusing on the responsibility to sustain and strengthen. Selecting subordinate leaders is a key part of this process. This decision boils down to getting the right people in the right seats on the right bus in the right way at the right time. However, since humans have developed an evolutionary bias towards negativity, let's start by looking at a few things we should avoid when picking leaders.[15]

Affinity Bias

One common misconception is believing that leaders who look, speak, or share our interests will naturally become great leaders like us,

and therefore should be prioritized for developmental opportunities. Humans are naturally inclined to trust and favor those who appear similar to themselves in appearance, speech, background, or interests. It's a tendency rooted in evolutionary psychology. In early human history, survival often depended on belonging to a cohesive group. People who were "like us" were more likely to be allies who shared resources, offered protection, and upheld common norms. Those who were "not like us" could represent an unknown threat. This is known as affinity bias, and is an instinct for in-group preference which became deeply embedded in our psychology as a way to quickly assess safety and potential cooperation.[16] Even today, our brains unconsciously process cues such as language, accent, clothing, and body language as indicators of group membership, influencing who we trust, support, and want to mentor.

In modern organizations, including the Army, this bias can shape leadership development in ways that unintentionally limit diversity of thought, background, and skill. Leaders may gravitate toward developing subordinates who remind them of themselves, believing they will naturally be effective leaders because they fit a familiar mold. However, prioritizing "people like us" can result in overlooking highly capable individuals who bring different perspectives, problem-solving approaches, and strengths that the organization needs. If you look around the room, and all you see is a reflection of yourself, there is a significant problem in your selection processes.

Recognizing and countering this bias is essential for building teams that are adaptable, innovative, and fully representative of the talent available. President Abraham Lincoln understood this when he picked his cabinet. Lincoln picked people who he knew disliked him and would be obstinate. In doing this, he assured himself that the best idea would move forward, not just his idea.[17] Imagine picking people to work closely with who strongly disliked you. This may have been one of Lincoln's most ingenious decisions, and it is one that NCOs and other leaders can mimic. By intentionally seeking to develop leaders from varied backgrounds, NCOs can break free from instinctive in-group favoritism and strengthen the overall effectiveness of the force.

The Babble Effect

Another misleading assumption is found in Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall's 2019 book, *Nine Lies About Work: A Freethinking Leader's Guide to the Real World*. Leaders, they argue, must be cautious of the "babble effect," or the tendency to favor individuals who simply talk the most or dominate conversations, rather than those who excel in building

strong interpersonal relationships, even in highly technical roles.[18] Some studies suggest that leaders are often chosen by how much they talk, with chattier personnel chosen for leadership roles more frequently.[19]

Predicting who will become an effective leader is inherently difficult, as the Hall of Fame Yankee catcher and manager Yogi Berra famously noted, "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future."[20] Therefore, stewardship in talent management requires deliberate, thoughtful selection focused on character, emotional intelligence, and the ability to inspire trust and honorable service, ensuring the profession's long-term excellence and resilience. That is a long list of things to get right, but if NCOs really want to succeed in this task, they'll invest time and energy in getting this right. Therefore, it is important to focus on finding leaders who can walk the walk, not just talk the walk. A leader's audio must match their video.

How to Pick a Good Leader

Character

The most important aspect of a leader is their character. It's also one of the most difficult to assess. It requires observing how someone acts in a variety of situations to see what they are really made of. Due to the observer effect, both molecules and people act differently when observed by others.[21] Character, on the other hand, like coaching great John Wooden observed is who you are when no one else is looking, an integral part of the army value of integrity, as well.[22] What is a leader to do?

In *Hidden Potential*, Adam Grant recants the story of Jose M. Hernandez's unlikely journey from the produce fields of California to becoming an astronaut for National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).[23] Hernandez applied to NASA on 12 separate occasions. He had a strong resume with a demonstrated history of exceeding expectations. Hernandez worked his way through engineering school while employed as a migrant farmer. He became a licensed pilot and certified scuba diver. He worked at the Livermore National Laboratory to develop digital mammography imaging systems. He even moved to Russia for a period to learn to speak Russian. He suffered 11 rejections before NASA accepted his application.

During his application process, Hernandez felt that his migrant farmer upbringing would somehow disqualify him from consideration, so he never mentioned how he grew up on his applications. The application forms didn't really have a field for that kind of information anyway. When he

was finally accepted in 2004, and the truth about the effort he put into becoming an astronaut was revealed, the committee said they would have accepted him much sooner had they known the challenges that he overcame…but they never really asked.[24]

In the Army, one of the things NCOs can do to assess someone's character is to get to know their life story. Understanding where someone came from, why they joined the Army, what obstacles they overcame, how they were raised, will provide fleeting glimmers of their character that might have otherwise been missed. Don't miss the hidden potential that knowing your soldiers can reveal.

Intellect

Being a leader of intellect is outlined in the Army's Leadership Requirement's Model.[25] Intellect is a vital character trait for leaders in the Army because it enables them to analyze complex situations, think critically, and make sound decisions under pressure. Army leaders often face unpredictable environments that demand quick problem-solving and strategic planning, and intellectual capability provides the foundation for these skills. A leader with strong intellect can absorb and process large amounts of information, anticipate potential challenges, and devise effective solutions that optimize mission success while minimizing risks. Furthermore, intellectual curiosity drives continuous learning and innovation, qualities essential for adapting to evolving technologies and warfare tactics in today's dynamic military landscape.

However, assessing intellect in others can be challenging, especially during leader selection in the Army. Intellectual capacity is not always evident in formal tests or interviews alone; it also involves practical judgment, creativity, and emotional intelligence. These are less quantifiable. Candidates may perform well academically but struggle to apply knowledge effectively in real-world scenarios. Alternatively, some individuals might demonstrate practical intelligence in the field without excelling in traditional intellectual measures. High intellect may sometimes be mistaken for arrogance or overconfidence, complicating evaluators' ability to separate intellectual strength from negative personality traits. Accurately assessing intellect, then, requires a comprehensive approach that considers both cognitive abilities and how candidates apply their thinking to leadership challenges.

If someone consistently comes up with creative or novel solutions to problems, even if they are "way outside of the box," that could indicate a high level of intellect. It might also indicate a lack of situational under-

standing. This is why intellect is so difficult to assess. The best approach in assessing a subordinate's intellect is to triangulate data. Consider their formal level of education and how have they handled complex situations in the past. If they can communicate effectively, or their ability to handle setbacks and challenges, it often reflects a higher level of practical intellect. Additionally, one of the best ways to assess intellect is to know how much someone reads. It turns out that people who read more know more, developing a higher level of intellect. Leaders are readers.

Empathy

Empathy is a critical character trait for leaders in the Army because it enables them to understand and connect with the emotions, perspectives, and needs of their soldiers. Empathy does not mean the same thing as sympathy. The terms are related but distinct emotional responses to someone else's situation. Empathy is the ability to deeply understand and share another person's feelings by putting yourself in their shoes. It involves actively connecting with their emotional experience and often leads to compassionate action because you genuinely feel what they feel. It is extremely hard to do, and it involves a deep understanding of human nature and one's subordinates. In contrast, sympathy means feeling concern or pity for someone else's misfortune, but from a more detached perspective, you recognize their pain but don't necessarily experience those feelings yourself. Sympathy is more about acknowledging someone's difficulties without fully immersing yourself in their emotional world.

In leadership, especially in the Army, empathy is often more valuable than sympathy because it builds trust. Empathy helps leaders connect on a personal level, making soldiers feel truly understood and supported. Alternately, sympathy from leaders directed towards subordinates can create distance by emphasizing their role as an observer rather than a participant in the soldier's experience. Empathetic leaders build stronger relationships, foster morale, and create an environment where team members feel valued and supported. In high-stress military settings, where soldiers may face physical danger, emotional strain, and uncertainty, leaders who demonstrate empathy can better anticipate and respond to these challenges, helping to maintain resilience and cohesion within the unit. By truly understanding their soldiers' experiences, empathetic leaders can tailor their guidance and support in ways that enhance trust and commitment, ultimately improving overall mission effectiveness.

Assessing empathy in potential Army leaders can be complex but is essential to selecting those who will effectively lead diverse teams. One

method to gauge empathy is through behavioral interviews that explore how candidates have handled interpersonal conflicts, supported team members in distress, or adapted their leadership style to meet individual needs. Role-playing scenarios and situational judgment tests can also provide insights into a candidate's ability to perceive and respond to others' emotions. Additionally, feedback from peers and subordinates, gathered through 360-degree evaluations, can reveal patterns of empathetic behavior over time. Observing nonverbal cues during interactions, such as active listening and appropriate emotional responses, offers further clues. While empathy can be subtle and sometimes masked, combining these assessment tools increases the likelihood of identifying leaders with genuine emotional insight and compassion.

Fitness

In the Army, fitness encompasses maintaining physical and mental readiness essential for effective leadership. Army leaders must demonstrate physical endurance, strength, and resilience because their role often demands long hours, stressful conditions, and the ability to lead by example in physically challenging environments. A fit leader inspires confidence and respect from their soldiers, showing commitment to the demanding standards required by military service. Moreover, physical fitness contributes directly to mental toughness, stress management, and overall health, qualities that underpin sound decision-making and the capacity to lead effectively under pressure.

When selecting leaders, fitness can be both overvalued and undervalued depending on the context. It is overvalued if it becomes the sole or dominant criterion, overshadowing equally critical leadership traits like judgment, intellect, empathy, and humility. A physically fit leader who lacks emotional intelligence or sound decision-making may struggle to build trust or manage complex situations effectively. Conversely, fitness can be undervalued if decision-makers ignore the physical demands of leadership in operational environments. Leaders who cannot meet the physical standards risk impairing unit effectiveness and morale. Therefore, the challenge lies in balancing fitness as one crucial component within a broader assessment of leadership potential, recognizing that physical readiness supports but does not alone define a successful Army leader.

Past Performance

Past performance is often one of the most reliable, if not the most reliable, indicators of a leader's future performance. It provides tangible evidence of how an individual has managed responsibilities, navigated

challenges, and led others in real-world situations. However, leaders must be careful not to let personal affinity cloud their judgment when reviewing this evidence. Selecting leaders is not about who someone says they are, but about how they have consistently performed over time. This is one reason job interviews, by themselves, often fail to identify the best person for a position, they capture self-presentation, not a proven record. Past performance reflects a blend of technical expertise, sound decision-making, interpersonal skill, resilience, and adherence to Army Values, all of which are critical to effective leadership. A demonstrated track record builds trust among both soldiers and superiors, signaling that the individual can be relied upon to lead effectively under pressure and deliver mission success. In the Army, where leadership decisions can involve life-or-death consequences, knowing that a candidate has repeatedly shown competence and sound judgment greatly reduces the risk of failure when entrusting them with greater responsibility.

This emphasis on past performance is a key reason the Army places significant weight on evaluations such as NCOERs and OERs when predicting future success. These reports capture the perspectives of multiple leaders over extended periods, offering a well-rounded picture of how an individual has carried out their duties, led soldiers, and grown professionally. While no single evaluation is flawless, taken together they reveal patterns of behavior and leadership qualities that often persist over time. Still, these records must be interpreted in context, mission complexity, team composition, and resource availability can all influence results. For this reason, the Army blends historical performance data with assessments of character, intellect, and potential, enabling a more informed decision about who is likely to succeed in complex and dynamic operational environments.

Beyond showcasing competence, past performance can also reveal a leader's drive and motivation, two qualities essential for success in the Army Disciplined initiative requires leaders who are willing to take ownership of problems and act without waiting for direction. Yet finding subordinates who consistently demonstrate that level of ownership and follow-through is more difficult than it might seem. Even at senior levels, it is rare to find leaders who consistently display this trait. When you do, they are invaluable. While the "disciplined" aspect of disciplined initiative can be developed, the underlying drive must already be present. Leaders who are motivated do not merely meet expectations; they seek out challenges, strive to improve, and push both themselves and their teams toward higher standards of excellence. This internal motivation is especially critical in the Army, where leadership demands are relentless and often require

sustained effort in the face of setbacks. By studying how a leader has approached past challenges, evaluators gain insight into their work ethic, passion for service, and willingness to act without waiting for orders, qualities that help ensure they will inspire the same dedication in their soldiers.

Integrity

Integrity is the foundation of trust, making it one of the most essential traits for any leader and the most critical of the Army Values. According to ADP 6-22, integrity means doing what is right, legally and morally, even when no one is watching.[26] Leaders with integrity consistently align their actions with their words, creating a predictable and dependable environment for their soldiers. In the Army, where lives, missions, and national interests are at stake, a lapse in integrity can have devastating consequences. It is the glue that binds the other Army Values, without integrity, loyalty becomes blind allegiance, duty becomes self-serving, and selfless service can turn into self-promotion. Integrity is the moral compass that guides decision-making under pressure and ensures leaders act in ways that uphold the Army's reputation and mission.

For leaders, integrity is not simply a personal trait; it is a professional imperative that influences the entire unit's culture. Soldiers watch their leaders closely, especially in moments of challenge or ambiguity. A leader who cuts corners, bends the truth, or tolerates unethical behavior sends a powerful and dangerous message that standards are negotiable. This erosion of trust can lead to a breakdown in discipline, cohesion, and effectiveness. On the other hand, a leader who upholds integrity, making tough but ethical decisions, admitting mistakes, and being transparent about their intentions, sets a standard that encourages the same behavior in others. Such leaders foster an environment where soldiers feel safe to speak up, admit errors, and act with moral courage, all of which are critical to mission success and the Army's long-term effectiveness.

Identifying junior leaders with high levels of integrity requires deliberate observation and assessment over time. According to ADP 6-22, integrity is revealed through consistent behavior, not isolated actions.[27] Integrity is not revealed in a single act. Look for junior leaders who do the right thing even when it is inconvenient or might cost them personally. Notice those who give honest assessments, resist the temptation to inflate results, and take responsibility for their actions, and their team's performance, and admit when they are wrong. Leaders with integrity will speak truth to power respectfully, admit when they do not know something, and prioritize the mission and their soldiers' welfare above personal gain.

Creativity

Creativity is so important that it can almost trump character as "the trait to have." Creativity is an essential leadership trait because it enables leaders to solve problems, adapt to changing conditions, and develop innovative approaches to complex challenges. In the Army, where leaders must operate in dynamic and often unpredictable environments, creativity allows them to think beyond standard procedures and generate solutions when conventional methods fall short. According to ADP 6-22, adaptability and sound judgment are core leader attributes, and creativity is central to both.[28] A creative leader can reframe problems, find new ways to leverage available resources, and anticipate potential obstacles before they arise. Creativity also fuels the ability to seize opportunities in the operational environment, turning challenges into advantages.

Creativity in leadership is not about disregarding doctrine or ignoring established procedures, it is about applying them in ways that best fit the situation. Leaders who foster creative thinking encourage their teams to explore multiple options, challenge assumptions, and learn from experimentation. This mindset is vital in today's Army, where asymmetric threats, rapidly advancing technology, and diverse mission sets demand flexibility and innovation. Units led by creative leaders tend to be more agile, resilient, and proactive, able to adjust plans on the fly without losing sight of the mission's intent. By blending creative thinking with disciplined initiative, leaders can execute operations in ways that maintain the commander's intent while adapting to real-world complexities. The Army desperately needs creative leaders who can do these things.

Identifying junior leaders with high levels of creativity requires looking for those who approach problems from unique angles and are not afraid to propose unconventional solutions. As ADP 6-22 emphasizes, these leaders will often ask insightful questions, connect ideas from different disciplines, and apply lessons learned in new contexts.[29] They tend to remain calm under pressure, quickly generating options rather than fixating on a single course of action. Junior leaders with creativity will often stand out in after-action reviews, offering constructive feedback and suggesting improvements that others might overlook. Recognizing and nurturing these leaders is essential for building formations capable of thriving in unpredictable environments, where innovation can make the difference between mission success and failure.

Knowledge

Knowledge, more accurately described as competence when in action, is a cornerstone of effective leadership in the Army because it ensures

leaders can make informed decisions, train their subordinates effectively, and execute missions to standard. ADP 6-2*2*: suggests competence is a critical leader attribute that combines technical proficiency, tactical expertise, and the ability to apply both under real-world conditions.[30] A competent leader instills confidence in their team by demonstrating mastery of their duties and a thorough understanding of the mission, equipment, and operational environment. Without competence, even the best intentions or strongest leadership traits will falter when faced with the demands of combat or complex operations. Competence is the bedrock upon which trust and respect are built, because soldiers are far more likely to follow a leader who clearly knows what they are doing.

Competence also has a direct impact on mission effectiveness and unit readiness. Leaders who are well-versed in their field can anticipate challenges, allocate resources efficiently, and adapt plans based on accurate situational assessments. This proficiency not only improves operational outcomes but also safeguards the welfare of soldiers by reducing unnecessary risks. *ADP 6-22* stresses that competence is not static, it must be continuously developed through training, education, and experience.[31] Leaders who fail to update their knowledge and skills risk becoming a liability to their formation, as outdated practices or misunderstandings of current doctrine can lead to poor decisions. Competent leaders, on the other hand, embrace lifelong learning and actively seek opportunities to expand their expertise, ensuring they remain an asset in any operational setting.

Identifying junior leaders with high levels of competence involves looking for those who consistently demonstrate proficiency in their tasks, produce quality results under pressure, and show a willingness to learn and improve. These leaders prepare thoroughly, know their soldiers' capabilities, and can explain tasks clearly and effectively. They are the ones others naturally turn to when a problem needs to be solved, or a task must be executed to standard. Evaluations, training exercises, and day-to-day performance all provide insight into a leader's competence. By recognizing and investing in junior leaders who exhibit strong knowledge and skill, the Army builds a cadre of professionals who can be trusted to lead effectively in any situation, from garrison duties to the most challenging combat operations.

Humility

Humility is last on this list, but it could easily be listed first as it is one of the most effective traits a leader can possess. In terms of importance, character comes first, then humility. Humility is only subordinate to char-

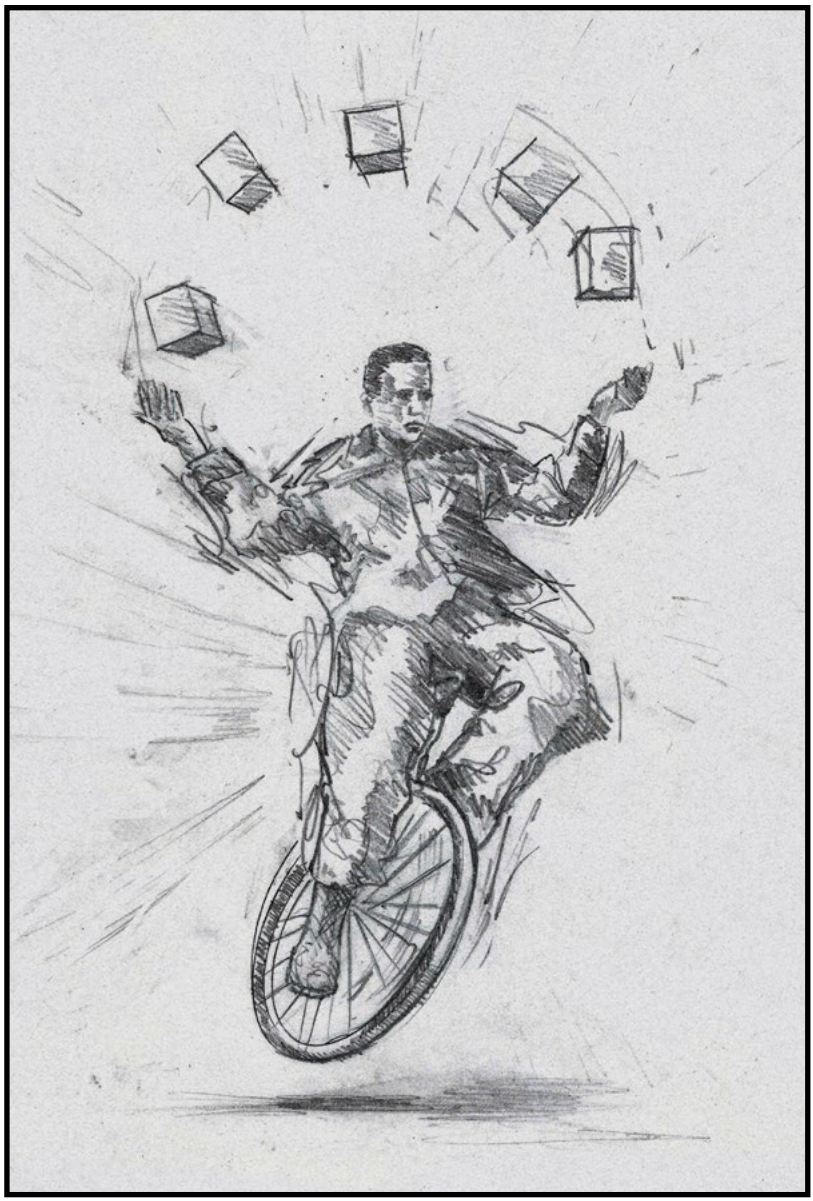


Figure 11.1. Stewarding the Profession. Dale Cordes, untitled, 2026, graphite on paper, Lawrence, Kansas.

acter because leaders of character possess a high level of humility, but it is possible to be genuinely humble and not have good character. Humility is a crucial character trait for leaders in the Army because it fosters a culture of trust, continuous learning, and collaboration. These are essential elements

for effective team performance in high-stakes environments. Humble leaders recognize their own limitations and are open to feedback and new ideas. This helps them make better decisions and adapt quickly to changing situations. Openness also encourages soldiers to speak up, share insights, and admit mistakes without fear of harsh judgment, ultimately strengthening unit cohesion and mission success. In a military context, where leadership directly impacts both the safety and effectiveness of a team, humility ensures that leaders remain grounded, focused on the welfare of their soldiers, and committed to shared goals rather than personal ego.

Despite its importance, humility is notoriously difficult to assess in others, particularly during the selection process for Army leaders. Unlike skills or technical knowledge, humility is an internal attitude that often manifests subtly through behavior, making it less tangible and harder to measure objectively.

Candidates for leadership positions may also mask true humility with superficial modesty. Conversely, they may display false confidence to impress evaluators. Additionally, military culture can sometimes emphasize strength, decisiveness, and confidence, which can overshadow or misinterpret humble behaviors as weakness. This complexity requires evaluators to look beyond first impressions and use nuanced observations over time to accurately gauge genuine humility in potential leaders. This can be observed in how candidates handle setbacks, listen to others, and share credit. It's also much easier to say than to do. Observing one's actions and how they handle a successful endeavor will provide insights into how humble another person really is. One simple trick is to count "I" statements in one's speech, with the number of "I" being directly inverse to the level of humility one possesses.

The Army Values

One of the last aspects we will touch on in regard to stewarding the profession is fully buying into the organization's values. For the Army, this means not only accepting the Army Values but actively living them in both personal and professional conduct. While this may sound cliché, and we have mentioned the Army Values at multiple points in this book, it is a fundamental element of building trust and credibility as a leader. Living the Army Values closes what leadership experts refer to as the knowing-doing gap, the space between understanding what the right thing is and actually doing it.[32] In the Army, that gap can have profound consequences for mission success, unit morale, and ethical conduct. Leaders who bridge this gap by consistently aligning actions with values

set a standard for others to follow and reinforce the culture of trust that underpins the profession of arms.

Of all the Army Values, integrity stands as the most powerful because it is the foundation upon which the others rest. Integrity ensures that leaders make decisions based on what is right, not what is convenient or personally advantageous. The other Army Values, loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, and personal courage, each serve a vital role, but they are only as strong as the integrity that supports them. Even values like loyalty, which is critical for cohesion and mutual support, can have a dark side when misplaced or taken to extremes. Unquestioning loyalty to an individual rather than to the Constitution, the mission, or the Army's ethical framework can enable unethical behavior and undermine the trust of the entire organization.

In addition to the seven Army Values, humility could be considered an unofficial "eighth value" for leaders. Humility allows leaders to recognize their limitations, seek input from others, and accept constructive criticism without defensiveness. It tempers confidence with self-awareness and keeps leaders focused on the mission rather than their own ego. Leaders who practice humility are more approachable, better at building cohesive teams, and more adaptable in the face of changing conditions. When combined with integrity, humility creates a leadership style that is both principled and inclusive, strengthening the Army Profession's commitment to ethical decision-making, disciplined initiative, and continuous improvement. By living all the Army Values, and embracing humility, leaders not only uphold the standards of the profession but also inspire others to do the same, ensuring that the Army remains worthy of the trust placed in it by the American people.

Leadership Philosophies

Having a clear leadership philosophy is essential to stewarding the profession because it provides a personal framework that guides decisions, actions, and interactions, ensuring they remain aligned with the Army's values and mission (your philosophy should align with your bosses' as well). A well-developed philosophy serves as a compass, helping leaders navigate complex situations, prioritize competing demands, and remain consistent in both garrison and operational environments. It communicates to subordinates what the leader stands for, what they expect, and how they will lead, which builds transparency and trust. More importantly, it reinforces the Army's professional identity by connecting personal leadership principles to the broader ethic and standards of the profession. Leaders

with a defined philosophy are better equipped to model the behaviors they expect from others, bridge the knowing-doing gap, and develop subordinates in ways that strengthen the Army's culture of trust, competence, and ethical service. In this way, a leadership philosophy not only shapes the leader's approach but also contributes directly to sustaining and advancing the profession as a whole. So, what is your leadership philosophy?

Roberts's Leadership Philosophy

> *I have found that the best approach to a leadership philosophy is to keep it simple enough to be remembered, and profound enough to mean something. Truth in advertising, I stole mine from a few of the great leaders that I have worked for, and I encourage you to do the same if you can. It's only plagiarism if you don't give credit. So, thank you Colonel Thomas and Colonel Kyle, you made me sound smarter than I could ever be on my own.*
>
> *My leadership philosophy can be summed up simply: Do good, avoid evil. In practice, this means doing the right thing, the right way, for the right reason, every time. It is more than a moral guideline; it is a deliberate choice to act with integrity, uphold the Army Values, and serve as a consistent example for others to follow. By framing leadership in this way, I remove ambiguity in decision-making and focus on aligning my actions with ethical principles, mission requirements, and the welfare of my soldiers. This philosophy keeps me grounded when faced with difficult choices and ensures that my leadership is a force for trust and cohesion rather than division or self-interest. It is a constant reminder that in the profession of arms, the manner in which we achieve results is just as important as the results themselves.*
>
> *"The difference between a successful person and others is not a lack of strength, not a lack of knowledge, but rather a lack of will."[33] Many people know the right course of action, and many possess the skills to execute it, but fewer have the determination to do what is right when it is inconvenient, difficult, or risky. Willpower is what transforms a leader's philosophy from words into action, bridging the knowing-doing gap and inspiring others to follow suit. In the Army, where the stakes can involve life, mission success, and the trust of the American people, will is the decisive factor that separates leaders who merely occupy a position from those who embody the profession's highest standards. By combining the clarity of "Do*

good, avoid evil" with the resolve to act on it in all circumstances, leaders can steward the profession, build unshakable trust, and leave a lasting positive impact on their soldiers and their units…and that folks is what it is all about. Leaving a positive impact on your organization and those with whom you served. That is what good NCOs do. That is what I have strived to do. That is what you should strive to do.

Richard's Leadership Philosophy

My friend Rob is much more eloquent than me when it comes to being able to describe a leadership philosophy. I also applaud that he has one that is so succinct. At this point in my career, I think I have changed my leadership philosophy multiple times due to changes in rank, position, command relationships, personal lessons learned, and lessons learned though my soldiers' actions. While there have been many adjustments, some things will always remain true. That is why I suggest creating a list of your non-negotiables, things that must or must never happen, and make the rest METT-TC. Earlier in this book we discussed how you can make a strong first impression on your new unit. At the same time, your new unit should make a strong first impression on you. Use that initial assessment to decide what you need to champion immediately and what can wait for later down the road. For example, if you are walking into a unit where your predecessor was just relieved (it happens more than we care to admit), then taking a strong stance on principles and discipline would be a great way to reassert your position as one that upholds the standard. You do not need to chastise your predecessor to demonstrate the difference, just be very forward about your intent to create a disciplined unit and that discipline starts with you. If you are walking into a unit that just suffered a tragedy, perhaps starting with notes of compassion and being approachable is a better starting philosophy.

The point is that many times the true role of the senior NCO is to be able to fit in wherever and however you are needed. This chameleon-like adaptability can be reflected in your leadership philosophy to ensure that you are who your unit and commander need you to be. Now as a rule, I never finalize my leadership philosophy until I have seen my commander's and have assessed the unit.

Discussion Questions

- **Joining the Army**

  How has your own understanding of being a professional soldier evolved throughout your career, and what does "stewardship of the profession" mean to you personally?

- **Building Trust**

  Describe a specific, practical action you have taken or could take in your unit to deliberately build trust with your soldiers, peers, and leaders.

- **Ethical Challenges**

  Share a time when you faced an ethical challenge where the easiest path was not the right one. How did you navigate that decision and what was the outcome?

- **Affinity Bias**

  What specific, conscious steps can you take to counteract these biases when identifying and developing future leaders in your team?

- **Stewarding Lethality**

  Provide a practical example of how a failure in stewardship could directly lead to a failure on the battlefield.

- **Character**

  Beyond formal evaluations, what methods can you use to genuinely get to know your soldiers and assess the critical leadership trait of character?

- **Creative Leadership**

  The text argues that "the Army desperately needs creative leaders." How can you create a climate in your unit that encourages creative thinking and disciplined initiative, even when it might mean challenging established procedures?

- **Loyalty vs. Values**

  Describe a potential situation where loyalty to an individual could conflict with your integrity and duty to the Army Ethic. How should a leader navigate such a conflict?

- **The Value of Humility**

  Humility is described as a vital trait that fosters a culture of learning. In a profession that values strength and confidence, how can a

leader effectively demonstrate humility without being perceived as weak or uncertain?

- **Leadership Philosophies**

  The authors present two different approaches to a leadership philosophy, one that is simple and constant, and another that is adaptable to the unit's needs (METT-TC dependent). Which approach resonates more with you, and what are the "non-negotiable" principles that form the foundation of your own leadership philosophy?

Recommended Further Reading

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Appendix A

An Appeal to Readers from the NCO Journal

Chago Zapata, Managing Editor, NCO Journal

The NCO Journal is a forum for the open exchange of ideas and information relevant to the NCO Corps. It is designed to support training, education and development. Informally, it's a place where NCOs can share the wealth of their knowledge and hard-earned experience. It's a space for NCOs to understand the present, learn ways to be or do better, and shape the future, not just the future of the NCO Corps, but the future of the US Army. The NCOs and former NCOs who work for this journal take time to ensure that content is relevant, useful, and valuable. Articles and contributions are easy to read for time-constrained NCOs and delve into topics and issues affecting today's NCO Corps. The NCO Journal is a means to gain leadership insights, and develop professionally. Writing for the journal improves and refines professional writing and communications skills. Reading it allows NCOs to stay updated on NCO Corps developments, and share experiences, lessons learned, and best practices.

History of the NCO Journal

The journal did not spring out of the woodwork; it has its own history. Much of its success can be attributed to two visionaries whose foresight and leadership led to the NCO Journal's founding —more than 30 years ago: Gen. Carl Vuono, former Chief of Staff of the Army, and Julius Gates, former Sgt. Maj. Of the Army. Vuono and Gates recognized the need to professionalize and empower the NCO Corps. Their solution was to create a professional forum, a journal, for NCOs written and researched by NCOs. Its purpose was to support enlisted leadership training, education, and development and to foster a stronger bond among the NCO Corps. It wasn't just about creating a publication; it was a strategic leadership act designed to maintain the momentum of NCO development and ensure they were prepared for future challenges. The journal provided a platform for the open exchange of ideas and timely information, solidifying NCOs' role as professional, educated, and adaptable leaders.

Sgt. 1st Class John D'Amato, public affairs NCO for the US Army Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA), at Fort Bliss, Texas, in the early 1990s, did most of the legwork in researching and obtaining the necessary information for staffing, budget, content and publication frequency. Because of his hard work, Army leaders supported and provided resources

for a magazine completely dedicated to NCO professional development. D'Amato also wrote about 90 percent of the articles for the inaugural spring 1991 issue. A perfect example is his article titled, Team Building on page four in the Leadership Competencies section where he talks about "building a strong combat ready team of individuals who think and act as one." It's a subject as relevant today as it was more than 30 years ago.

Col. Fredrick Van Horn, then commandant of USASMA, and his command sergeant major, Bill Mock, ensured that the process of creating the NCO Journal remained on track and kept Vuono and Gates informed of the magazine's progress. Mock selected Master Sgt. Gil High as the magazine's first editor, recruiting him away from Soldiers magazine. After Mock came Command Sgt. Maj. Ronnie Strahan, who used video teleconferencing to spread the word about The NCO Journal' existence and the valuable NCO insights and lessons it provided, garnering support and collecting stories from the field. Because of his efforts, both readership and submissions to the magazine increased.

During the Journal's early years Jim Collins, a Department of the Army civilian was hired as managing editor, a decision Van Horn later called one of the best things to happen to the magazine. Collins gave the Journal continuity and stability, something rotating soldiers could not do. Sgt. Maj. Bill Lopez became the editor-in-chief after graduating from the Sergeants Major Course (SMC) Class 37, maintaining consistency throughout the magazine's inaugural year. He led the first team of seasoned professionals and took steps to improve the Journal.

Since those early days, the NCO Journal has had numerous editors, managing editors, staff writers and graphic artists—too many to mention —and each brought something new to the Journal. This resulted in constant improvements throughout its more than 30-year history.

In 1998 and 1999, The NCO Journal almost disappeared because of budget constraints. No hard copies were produced and, as a result, it lost much of its readership and interest from the NCO Corps. That was, however, until 2000 when Sgt. Maj. Of the Army Jack Tilley insisted that it return to print. That decision preserved an asset to the US Army whose worth was soon confirmed; in the years immediately following 11 September 2001, the journal provided valuable lessons to the enlisted fighting force in real time. It was a source of advice, lessons learned, and ideas for improvements throughout the Global War on Terror (GWOT). It gave NCOs a platform to share the tactics, the leadership tricks, the operational lessons that actually worked in the field and get that information out to the

force quickly. This was huge because it helped the Army catch up to the realities of modern warfare, where NCOs were making more decisions on their own than ever before. A good example is the October 2013 article "NCOs Must Lead in this Period of Uncertainty" by SMA Raymond Chandler. He used the NCO Journal to broadcast a valuable lesson from GWOT. The message was, as the mission shifted from counterinsurgency, NCOs needed to become more autonomous leaders. It was a direct message from the top, using the NCO Journal to prepare the force for its next chapter based on real-world battlefield experience.

In 2009, Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. George W. Casey Jr. and Sgt. Maj. Of the Army Kenneth O. Preston declared it the "Year of the NCO" to recognize the NCO Corps' contribution and pay tribute to the vital roles they play in almost every aspect of the Army. The NCO Journal increased the writing staff, page count and publication frequency. Leadership encouraged journal staff and contributors to produce innovative, but informative, essays that could be discussed in the field.

In March of 2013, the NCO Journal transitioned to an online-only digital platform. In a social media environment filled with digital content of all types, the NCO Journal struggled to use available technology and multimedia capabilities to publish content that reached modern NCOs around the world effectively. I (Chago) joined the NCO Journal in 2015, and my first order of business was to provide a more creative forum for NCO professional development. The journal needed a multifaceted approach designed to reach the modern digital native NCOs of the 21st Century. Command Sgt. Maj. Dennis E. Defreese, the USASMA commandant, gave me free reign. First, my team and I changed the website layout to adjust automatically depending on the device being used, whether on a computer, phone or tablet, making the content more accessible and easier to read. Second, the Journal needed a new, fresh look. We changed the logo, replacing the A in Journal with a sergeant's chevron and creating an animated banner that incorporated every NCO rank. In 2016, in an effort to produce multimedia content, we had a brief run publishing the NCO Journal News, a short, NCO-focused newscast published on our YouTube channel and marketed on our social media platforms. In April of 2017, the NCO Journal moved from Fort Bliss, Texas to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, joining Army University Press and changing from a news format to a more scholarly format, allowing NCOs a professional forum where they could advance their writing skills and share information and points of view. During the pandemic, the NCO Journal remained relevant and attuned to the needs of the NCO Corps—to maintain highly trained, disciplined,

and fit leaders capable of building cohesive teams, fostering resilience, and mastering their craft. We worked hard to produce a special edition commemorating the Journal's 30th anniversary, highlighting the evolution of the NCO Corps. It featured reflections from enlisted leadership on the "backbone of the Army," focusing on training, mentorship, and building cohesive teams for future, complex operational environments.

Multimedia Components Recently Added

In early 2023, we collaborated to create the "NCO Journal Podcast" and the "Sergeant's Time Podcast." In the "NCO Journal Podcast," we have in-depth discussions with authors about their articles, providing soldier perspectives and discourse in both written and audio formats. In the "Sergeant's Time Podcast," on the other hand, the focus remains on professional growth and amplifying the NCO voice through informal, personal conversations with senior leaders.

In November 2023, we collaborated with the Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A) and the NCO Leadership Center of Excellence (NCOL-CoE) to develop, implement, and maintain the NCO Journal and Sergeants Major Academy Contributing Editors Program. The program promotes scholarly activity, professional military writing, professional dialogue, and original research on subjects relevant to the NCO Corps, the US and allied militaries, and the national security professional community. The program also augmented the NCO Journal's editorial capacity. Sgt. 1st Class Osvaldo Equite received the 2023 Secretary of the Army Award for Publications Improvements because of this innovative approach to making the NCO Journal more relevant and productive. Though it was a team effort, Equite came up with the initial concept, communicated with SGM-A leadership, and organized the many minute details required to make the partnership work.

In the spring of 2024, the journal launched the NCO Creative Domain, a space for creative, insightful, diverse, and unconventional works. It is a vibrant, artistic sandbox for US Army NCOs to ditch the military's rigid format and share their stories through fiction, creative non-fiction, imaginative scenarios, poetry and book, movie, and video game reviews. We decided that if we wanted to reach the younger audience, the Army's corporals, sergeants and staff sergeants, and get them reading and writing early in their careers, we needed to provide them with a place where they could practice their writing skills in a more creative, unconventional way. It is an outlet where they can express themselves in ways different than the more traditional, scholarly format employed by PME schools for NCOs.

During the 2024 Association of the US Army (AUSA) conference, we launched Muddy Boots, a digital collection of articles written by some of the Army's most experienced NCOs to support the Harding Project, the Chief of Staff of the Army's initiative for reinvigorating writing and discourse across the force. The Harding Project is a critical component of the Chief of Staff's stated priority to strengthen the profession. Muddy Boots articles capture the myriad experiences gained by the Army's most senior NCOs across the Army from the past twenty years of armed conflict, focused on practical, actionable wisdom designed to share lessons learned directly from the field, often highlighting mentorship, discipline, and MOS competency

Writing is an important communications skill, and the earlier NCOs start developing it, the more skilled they'll be when the time comes to employ it, whether it's writing a research paper in APA format at ALC, filling out a developmental counseling form on a subordinate soldier, or writing an after-action report. The process of writing for publication forces NCOs to reflect on their experiences and articulate their ideas clearly and persuasively. This is a crucial skill for future senior leaders and advisors who may have to think and act both tactically and strategically. The NCO Journal is an incredibly important, peer-to-peer NCO resource that goes beyond formal military training. It exists to help NCOs grow professionally, it's a place where ideas are exchanged and experiences are shared. A good example is the May 2022 article "The Understated Art of Knowing When to ST*U" by Retired Sgt. Maj. Robert Nelson, Ph.D., and retired Command Sgt. Maj. Gabriel Arnold. It was very popular, generated significant discussion and prompted a direct response article, "Don't STFU" by Maj. L. Burton Brender. The discussion continued in a podcast where the authors and NCO Journal staff debated the merits of staying silent versus speaking up in challenging environments and continued through a video produced by 7th Army Training Command, which featured one of the original authors, Gabriel Arnold, discussing the article and the responses to it. It amplifies voices and provides a respected platform that can influence policy and strategy by sharing practical, frontline perspectives.

The NCO Journal captures lessons learned, acting as a repository for valuable tactical knowledge, tips, and best practices that might otherwise only be passed down verbally. It ensures that hard-earned wisdom is preserved and shared across the entire NCO Corps. To prove this point, many of the articles published in the inaugural Spring 1991 edition are as valid and useful today as they were more than 30 years ago. One article that stands out for its enduring relevance is "Our Warrior Ethos: An Essay" by

1st Sgt. Tammy Treat. It focuses on lessons learned from Operation Desert Storm and on the NCO Corps' foundational principles—tough training, building cohesive bonds, and an unwavering commitment to both the mission and soldier welfare. The subject is timeless, making her essay as valuable today as it was then by reminding NCOs of their core duties, which transcend any changes in technology or battlefield tactics.

Writing helps build community. By providing a space for NCOs across active, Guard, and Reserve components to share their insights, the NCO Journal fosters a closer bond and a shared professional culture.

Invitation to New Writers

Noncommissioned officers, the strength of the Army rests in your experience and on your shoulders. The NCO Journal exists to amplify your voice, to share your lessons, and to shape the future of the NCO Corps. Don't let that hard-earned knowledge stay locked in your unit or lost to time once you ETS.

Whether you've faced a unique tactical challenge, developed an innovative solution, learned something useful from the war in Ukraine, or simply have a perspective to share, the NCO Journal is the forum for professional development and open dialogue.

Now is the time to contribute.

Submit your insights for consideration or unleash your creativity in the NCO Creative Domain. For more information and submission guidelines, visit the NCO Creative Domain section of the NCO Journal website.

Visit the NCO Journal today and become a part of the conversation. Let's build a stronger, more informed NCO Corps—together.

Appendix B

Frequently Asked Questions

This section consists of twelve commonly asked questions that we have received over our careers. While these are common questions, our answers may not be what you would expect, and we feel we should mention that the opinions expressed in this section do not represent the official policies of the Army. We also acknowledge that others may have better answers to the questions than we have provided, and we encourage you to always speak with your NCO support channel or mentors when encountering a problem. Along with those efforts, we solicited some of the Sergeants Major currently serving in today's US Army and also asked them to provide some answers to these questions. Multiple perspectives always make the best route to take clearer.

1. Question: What's your advice for a brand-new sergeant moving to their first duty station as an NCO?

Robert: NCOs are problem solvers, not problem causers. Apply this same thought to your fitness. Showing up to a unit out of shape and not being able to do PT with your Soldiers or falling out of a run is poor form.

In addition to fitness, it is also a good idea to research your unit through your sponsor. Get a copy of the chain of command, ask for the unit METL and a training schedule. It is always a good idea to understand where the unit is in regard to your future training schedule. In some cases you may be asked to go to the field shortly after your arrival. A final consideration for a new NCO is to have a plan. Know what you want to see your Soldiers do, and have your initial counseling statements ready. Align your priorities for understanding your unit and Soldiers with the unit training plan and create an integration schedule.

One more note to consider when you show up to a new unit…no matter how bad something may be messed up, never-ever-ever criticize the leader you replaced. There are two reasons for this. First, you will never know how hard they worked to get the unit to where it is, even if you think it still needs improvement. Second, professionals don't assign blame for a situation they know nothing about. We identify the problem, and we find a solution. Blaming a situation on a previous leader only makes you look bad and undermines your authority as a leader.

Richard: Be patient. Too many leaders (to include myself) want to change things the moment they get somewhere so they feel like they are immediately adding value to the unit. This can be dangerous because the

moves or changes could be being made before you fully understand the situation. I would say unless there is an immediate issue you have to act upon quickly, then take the time to assess the situation prior to action.

CSM Tammy Everette, Commandant, NCO Leadership Center of Excellence: Whatever you are responsible for—own it and master it!

CSM Jonathan Reffeor, 3ID: Transitioning from junior enlisted ranks to becoming a noncommissioned officer (NCO) is both a significant milestone and a profound responsibility. As a newly promoted sergeant arriving at your first duty station, you are no longer just a Soldier—you are a leader, expected to set the tone from day one.

Start by understanding that this is a fresh beginning. Most Soldiers and leaders at your new unit won't know your background, but they will expect competence, confidence, and a willingness to learn. Remember, you were promoted not only for what you've achieved, but for the leadership potential you bring forward. Seize every opportunity to grow: volunteer for new responsibilities, absorb institutional knowledge, and don't shy away from making mistakes—they are powerful tools for development.

Familiarize yourself with the unit's chain of command and history, and commit to supporting the standards laid out in the Blue Book. Embrace the daily responsibilities of your rank: lead, inspect and train. Build a support network of like-minded sergeants and work together to create meaningful change within your formation—whether it's through organizing sergeant time training or mentoring junior Soldiers.

Leadership is not about perfection, but consistency and authenticity. Observe your new environment before making changes. Show initiative, stay visible, and strive to build quiet credibility with your team. Uphold standards and discipline even when no one is watching. Those moments of integrity will define your career more than any recognition.

Above all, never lose sight of your duty to guide and develop Soldiers. Be honest, be firm, and always keep their best interests in mind. Your leadership has the power to shape futures—and that's a legacy worth building.

CSM Shawn Carns, CAC: First off, congratulations. Earning those stripes is a pivotal moment. Now the real work begins. My advice is simple: close your mouth and open your ears and eyes. You're not a specialist anymore. You are now responsible for the lives and welfare of other human beings.

Be the Standard: From your haircut to your PT score, from your punctuality to your professionalism, you are the example. Soldiers will look for cracks in your armor; don›t give them any.

Know Your People: Learn everything about your soldiers. Not just their names. Know their spouses› names, their kids› names, what car they drive, what their goals are, and what keeps them up at night. You can›t lead a soldier you don›t know.

Master Your Craft: You must be the subject matter expert in your MOS. If you›re an 11B, you better be the most lethal man in your squad. If you›re a 92Y, that supply room better be tighter than a drum. Your soldiers› confidence in you starts with your competence.

Find Your «Gray-Beard»: Locate the saltiest Staff Sergeant or Sergeant First Class in your section and learn from them. They›ve seen it all. Buy them a coffee, ask questions, and absorb their wisdom. They will be your most valuable resource.

SGM Melendez, Department of the Army G2: The three B's… Be Humble, Be Present, and Be Authentic.

Be Humble: Young Soldiers, to include young Officers and members of our civilian workforce, want a leader who is not afraid to say, "I don't know". Soldiers don't need young Sergeants to know everything. They need a leader they can trust. Being humble enough to admit when you don't know something and asking for help builds trust. It affords the opportunity of that leader to assess the technical competence of their subordinates.

Be Present: You need to be exactly where you can be the most impactful to the task at hand! Wherever your Soldiers are, you need to be there. Present, focused, prepared! At physical readiness training, at the motor pool, in the field, wherever the suckiest part of day is, you need to be there with a positive attitude. Your Soldiers will emulate your attitude.

Be Authentic: Soldiers can see a fake leader from a mile away, and no one wants to follow a fake leader! Just be who you are. Many young NCOs try to "be" like the best leaders they've had. While it is ok to incorporate leadership traits from other great leaders, you must stay grounded in who you are! If you are an introvert, cool. An extrovert, awesome. Just be you and do the right thing! Your Soldiers will respect you and follow you.

2. Question: Where can NCOs find resources for their soldiers on base? Traditional and non-traditional?

CSM Tammy Everette, Commandant, NCO Leadership Center of Excellence: Most installations have a Soldier Support Center or a Welcome Center; most resources for an installation can be found there. Non-traditionally, a good sponsor is really the best resource for soldiers.

CSM Jonathan Reffeor, 3ID: Supporting Soldiers requires more than just leadership on the battlefield—it demands awareness, accessibility and action when it comes to connecting troops with the right resources. Whether it's traditional services or lesser-known avenues, noncommissioned officers play a crucial role in bridging Soldiers to the help they need.

The foundation starts with people. Fellow NCOs and organizational leaders are often the most direct and informed sources for resource guidance. Reception centers, support offices and USOs across the installation serve as core pillars of assistance. Army Community Service (ACS), Military and Family Life Counselors (MFLCs), and unit chaplains are also key partners in addressing personal and professional challenges.

Beyond the traditional, modern tools offer new levels of convenience. Platforms like the My Army Post app deliver installation-specific information in one accessible location. Community fairs, Strong Family Readiness Groups (SFRG), and Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers (BOSS) programs are excellent ways to stay engaged and informed. Even social media platforms—when used responsibly—can connect NCOs to timely updates, support networks and local initiatives.

At every level, leaders should proactively engage and encourage Soldiers to access available resources. NCOs don't have to know every answer—but they must know where to look and who to ask. In the end, taking care of Soldiers starts with knowing what's out there. By leveraging both formal systems and informal networks, NCOs ensure their formations are not just mission-ready—but supported, informed and resilient.

SGM Petra M. Casarez, Deputy Chief of Staff, G-4 SGM: Familiarizing themselves with on-base support services like ACS, Chaplain services, medical and legal aid, and the Education Center is crucial. Beyond these, NCOs should explore and leverage non-traditional resources such as peer groups, mentorship opportunities, and relevant online communities (with appropriate discretion). Proactive communication with Soldiers, including regular check-ins and counseling, helps identify needs and concerns. Building relationships with key support personnel and maintaining

a readily accessible resource list, physical or digital, further strengthens an NCO's ability to provide comprehensive Soldier care.

CSM Shawn Carns, CAC: Your NCO toolkit needs to be full of resources. Knowing where to send a soldier in need is as important as knowing how to read a map.

Traditional

Army Community Service (ACS): This is your one-stop shop. Financial counseling (AER), family advocacy programs, relocation assistance—it's all there. Walk in and get to know the staff before you need them.

Chaplain: They offer 100% confidentiality. For issues of faith, morality, or just needing a trusted ear when a soldier is at rock bottom, the Chaplain is a critical asset.

Behavioral Health (MFLC): The stigma is fading. The Military & Family Life Counselors (MFLCs) are civilian contractors who can provide short-term, non-medical counseling outside of the traditional military healthcare system. It's confidential and won't go on a soldier's record.

Inspector General (IG): This is a tool for fixing systemic problems or issues that can't be resolved through the chain of command. Use it wisely.

Education Center: For soldiers looking to use their Tuition Assistance or get information on the GI Bill.

Non-Traditional

The BOSS Program (Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers): Don't underestimate this. It keeps soldiers engaged, builds morale, and can be a great source of information on what's really going on with the junior enlisted.

Unit FRG (Family Readiness Group): Get involved. It's a direct line to the pulse of the families. A stressed family equals a distracted soldier.

Post Gym/MWR Facilities: The staff there see soldiers in a different light. They might notice a soldier who is isolating themselves or struggling. They are part of the community and can be a source of information and support.

Veteran Service Organizations (VFW, American Legion) on or near post: These are filled with veterans who have walked the same path. They offer mentorship and a different perspective.

3. Question: You have a platoon leader who won't listen to the experiences of NCOs and soldiers. How would you effectively tackle this?

Robert: Duct tape and a baseball bat will usually help a stubborn platoon leader to begin to appreciate the value of their NCO's experience. In the event you did not pick up my humor, I am joking. The best way to influence someone in a senior position, be it a platoon sergeant or a four-star general is to be calm, competent and patient. Officers who do not like to listen to their NCOs are usually the products of poor NCO leadership at some point in their professional development. In these cases, the officer is misattributing their experience to all NCOs and will need you to help them get past their prior experience.

Be calm, don't get upset if your advice is not accepted. Be competent, work hard to know what you are doing, and strive for excellence in all that you do. Finally, be patient, it takes time for people to change their personal beliefs. Change is not easy, and you are essentially asking a person to change by using your personal example as a motivator for it. This is not a fast process, but it is worthwhile, and important that it happens while someone is a stubborn lieutenant as compared to when they become a stubborn general. Take a guess at which rank is easier to get to change, and you will see why it is important to start the process as soon as possible.

Richard: Platoon leaders are just like everyone else, their personalities and openness to advice varies on the individual. While it is great to assume that NCOs always have all the answers, sometimes when a PL is not listening, it is because the NCO is giving conflicting guidance than what the PL received from their officer supervisor. If the difference of opinion is over something trivial, and both the PL's approach and the NCO's suggestion will get the job done, then let the PL do it their way. I know no one wants to hear it, but they are in charge and picking your battles with the PL could be very important. Let them win this one and support them in their plan. Then, if there is something serious, where the PL is going to cause mission failure, or get someone hurt, and you object, the PL should notice that this is out of character with the fact that you normally support them, and they may stop and listen. Make sure you have this conversation in private because if you openly challenge their guidance, they may become defensive and not listen to you at all.

If the PL is super hardheaded and refuses to listen to anyone, or they show a large amount of disrespect for enlisted, then talk with your NCO support channel. Somewhere in that support channel, you should find a good

command team where the commander and NCO listen to each other. That is where the conversation has to happen to set a plan to correct the PL.

One other thing to think about, if the PL is being openly disrespected, then they are eventually going to get upset and fight back. I have seen PFCs openly making fun of a PL because the platoon sergeant would constantly berate the PL in front of Soldiers. If something like this is happening, and then the PL stands their ground, we (enlisted personnel) cannot turn around and villainize the PL. We must treat the PL with the same respect that we hope they give us.

CSM Tammy Everette, Commandant, NCO Leadership Center of Excellence: I would first ask, is the Platoon Leader wrong? Sometimes, a leader does not execute the mission the same way we would, but it doesn't mean they are wrong. Perhaps they have new ideas or see things from a different perspective; be open to new ideas. And if they fail? There's growth in that. Sometimes we must fail in order to learn. If the Platoon Leader does fail, don't be boastful. Just be there to help them along the way. It will build the team, and it will build his/her confidence in the NCO Corps.

CSM Jonathan Reffeor, 3ID: When a platoon leader fails to acknowledge the insight and experience of NCOs and Soldiers, it not only undermines trust, but jeopardizes the mission. The question isn't just how to deal with it, it's how to lead through it with professionalism, patience and purpose.

The first step is a direct and respectful conversation. Sit down with your platoon leader to understand the root cause: Is it a matter of inexperience, past mistakes, or a misunderstanding about roles and responsibilities? Express the value that enlisted experience brings to the table and demonstrate how shared knowledge can support the unit's goals. Consider requesting your leader's Support Form and reviewing expectations from their rater and senior rater—this ensures alignment across the team and fosters accountability from both sides.

Equally important is self-reflection. Examine how you've approached the relationship thus far. Are there gaps in trust or professionalism that you might address? As an NCO, the responsibility to take initiative lies with you. Build trust by modeling consistency, integrity and technical competence. Trust isn't worn—it's earned, conversation by conversation, action by action.

If open communication fails to break through, seek support from a higher-level officer with whom you have an existing rapport. Clearly outline the patterns you've observed and the contributions your team has

made. Framing the issue constructively, rather than as a complaint, can help a senior leader recognize the value of intervening appropriately.

Lastly, don't shy away from having a seat at the table. Just because your voice hasn't been heard yet doesn't mean it shouldn't be. Effective leadership isn't about positional authority—it's about influence, and influence starts with persistence, respect, and a deep commitment to the Soldiers you serve.

By taking a calm, deliberate approach that emphasizes communication, accountability and unity of effort, you can help turn a one-way leadership dynamic into a collaborative command team. After all, the mission—and your Soldiers—deserve nothing less.

SGM Petra M. Casarez, Deputy Chief of Staff, G-4 SGM: If a platoon leader disregards NCO and Soldier input, first gather specific examples and consider the best approach. If comfortable, address the issue directly with the platoon leader, emphasizing the benefits of valuing experience. If this fails or is inappropriate, involve the First Sergeant and, if necessary, the Company Commander. Throughout the process, focus on solutions, maintain professionalism, and respect the chain of command. Prioritize open communication and a collaborative environment for improved platoon effectiveness.

CSM Shawn Carns, CAC: This is a classic, and delicate, situation. Your PL is likely a sharp, intelligent young officer, but they lack the one thing you have: experience. Your job is to build a bridge, not a wall.

1. Never Challenge Them in Public: You will never win a public argument with a lieutenant. It undermines their authority and makes you look petty. All crucial conversations happen behind closed doors.

2. Use "I" Statements and Offer Solutions: Instead of saying, "Sir, your plan is wrong," try, "Sir, based on my experience with this terrain in the past, I'm concerned about X. May I suggest we consider Y as a course of action? It might mitigate Z." You're not questioning their authority; you're providing vital intel to help them succeed. Their success is your success.

3. Find a Third-Party Validator: Use doctrine. Pull out the FM or ATP. "Sir, doctrine suggests that for this type of operation, we should..." It's not you versus them; it's you both versus the standard.

4. Document and Communicate Up: If this behavior is dangerous or severely undermining the platoon, you have a duty to professionally and privately inform your Platoon Sergeant. A good PSG will know how

to mentor that PL or engage the Company Commander if necessary. This is a last resort, but your loyalty is to the welfare of the soldiers and the accomplishment of the mission, not to one person's ego.

4. Question: Your Soldier comes to you for help and guidance on a sensitive topic. How can you be a good advocate for them?

Robert: In my experience, sensitive topics usually require action, and Soldiers come to you when they know you will do the right thing and help them solve their problem. Never fall into the trap of simply being an empathetic ear. Learning about a problem or issue, and not acting or informing the appropriate authorities is a risk that you do not need to take.

Richard: The first thing to understand about a situation like this is that it is a golden opportunity to help shape and enhance your relationship with your Soldier. Screwing it up could have terrible consequences but handling it correctly could help shape what a good leader looks like to your Soldier. Consider moving the conversation to a more private place. Do not carry out any conversations in a public forum such as the motor pool or the hallway. This seems like it should be an obvious "think" but a lot of leaders lack patience and will ask immediately what the Soldier wants to talk about. Let the Soldier know straight away what you can keep private and what you cannot. The Soldier might want to ask about how they deal with a criminal offence they committed, or maybe they witnessed something. You are not a Chaplain. You cannot keep that secret so let them know right away that there are limits on what you can or cannot keep confidential. If the Soldier seems hesitant to talk after you disclose this, offer to escort them to a chaplain if they want to talk with someone confidentiality. If they still want to talk after you explain what you can and cannot keep confidential, and they want to tell you whatever is on their mind, then practice active listening. Let them get everything off of their chest. Don't rush them. Whatever they are telling you about might be difficult to talk about so trying to rush them to getting to the point could be incredibly tone deaf to what they need at the time. Instead, don't interrupt them. Let them talk, then ask clarifying questions as they are appropriate. When they are done, make sure you fully understand what they are asking you. Are they seeking help or just advice? Are you the best person to answer their questions or requests? Be open and honest on what you can and cannot do and where you are able to offer real advice. Do not be scared to let them know if you are not the best person to help with a situation. For example, if they are telling you about marital problems, and you have never been in a serious relationship, maybe you should not act like the relationship sage you believe you are. If you can offer advice or assistance, then do so. If it is something that needs to be reported, then do so and let them know that you need to and why. If you are not the person to give advice on the subject, then tell them who you think would be good for addressing their concern

and give them the choice if they want to talk to that person or not. Whatever you do, make sure they understand that you have their best interest at heart (Unless they are acting against UCMJ or the Army Values). If you don't do this right, it will be the last time they come to you with a problem.

CSM Tammy Everette, Commandant, NCO Leadership Center of Excellence: Help them! Since it's a sensitive topic, exercise discretion and enlist the chain of command, if the situation warrants. The most important thing is to ensure you help them from start to finish.

CSM Jonathan Reffeor, 3ID: When a Soldier approaches you with a sensitive issue, it's a sign of deep trust—and a moment that demands care, empathy and professionalism. As a noncommissioned officer, being an effective advocate requires more than offering solutions. It's about being present, listening intently and guiding them toward the right support.

The first step is active listening. Give them your full attention, seek to understand their concern without interruption, and resist the urge to react too quickly. Sometimes the most powerful thing you can offer is not advice—but presence. Empathy is essential, even if you don't fully relate to their experience. Place yourself in their shoes and approach the moment with humility and compassion.

Be transparent in your response. If you don't know the answer, say so. Don't speculate or guess—doing so may cause more harm than good. Instead, focus on accuracy. Ensure that any guidance you provide is rooted in fact and, when in doubt, personally escort the Soldier to a subject matter expert. Resources like behavioral health, legal assistance or chaplain services are there to help—connecting the Soldier to the right one can make all the difference.

Above all, advocate with authenticity. Your Soldiers aren't looking for perfection—they're seeking someone who listens, respects their concerns, and takes meaningful action. Being that kind of leader builds trust that lasts far beyond the conversation. In the end, the measure of advocacy is not in having all the answers, but in being a reliable bridge to the support they need. When a Soldier knows they can come to you and be heard, believed and helped—they've already taken the first step toward healing. And that's leadership at its best.

CSM Shawn Carns, CAC: This is where you earn your stripes. This is leadership.

1. Listen Actively and Without Judgment: Put your phone away. Give them your undivided attention. Let them talk. Don't interrupt. Your office, the back of a HMMWV, wherever—make it a safe space.

2. Know Your Limits and Your Reporting Requirements: This is critical. You are not a chaplain, a lawyer, or a SHARP VA. Be upfront about your role. For issues concerning sexual assault/harassment (SHARP) or Equal Opportunity (EO), you are a mandatory reporter in most cases. You must explain this to the soldier so they can make an informed decision about what they share. Tell them, "I am here for you, and I will walk with you every step of the way, but you need to know that for certain issues, I am required by regulation to report it. This is to protect you and ensure you get the right help."

3. Empower, Don't Command: Don't tell them what to do. Lay out their options. "We can go to the Chaplain for a confidential talk. We can go to Behavioral Health. We can talk to the Company Commander. We can go to the SHARP representative. Which of these sounds like the right first step for you?"

4. Walk With Them: Don't just point to a building. If they decide to go to ACS, walk them over there. Introduce them to the counselor. Follow up afterwards. Show them, unequivocally, that you have their back.

SGM Melendez, Department of the Army G2: Shut up and listen! Many young NCOs often lack in their ability to just let their Soldiers talk sincerely and candidly without fear of judgement. Listen to understand the problem and create an environment where the Soldier can be part of the solution. Ask open-ended questions to gain better understanding and to help them get to resolution. If you don't know how to help, say so, and tell the Soldier, you will figure it out together. The ability to lead a Soldier through a challenging situation where they are part of the solution, will help them not only solve the problem, but grow into a leader that will help others.

5. Question: What is the best advice you received as an NCO?

Robert: One of my favorite CSMs once said, "never pass up the opportunity to shut the *uck up." It stuck with me because it was funny, but it is also good advice. There are too many examples of leaders who like to hear themselves talk, and never listen. If you take the time to speak a little less, listen a little more, and think a little deeper, you will be amazed at how much better you will understand your operating environment and those within it. If you don't like my CSM's words, consider the acronym WAIT (why am I talking). If you don't have something to say that adds value to the convention, shut the *uck up. In email conversations, consider the acronym WAISTE (why am I sending this email), the same thoughts apply.

That was my fun one. The other good piece of advice I received came from a PA I worked for as a Private. His name was Mark Crabb, and he said that I was smart, but I should never stop learning. An education is a journey, not a destination. While this sounds cliche, I assure you that the pace of innovation is so great that there are things students learn as freshmen in college that will be outdated by the time they graduate. As a non-commissioned officer in the United States Army, you must be willing to grow, learn, and adapt to changing threats on the battlefield. If you do not do these things, the best you will be is irrelevant and the worst you will be is dead. The Army is a contact sport, and to play it well, you have to keep learning…I promise you, our enemies are.

Richard: Sadly, the best advice I ever received as an NCO came very late in my career. The advice was that I could not do everything myself and that I needed to take better care of myself. I fell into the leadership trap of taking better care of my Soldiers than taking care of myself. For example, I would support my Soldiers going to health appointments and taking temp profiles if they were injured, but I would pop Motrin and take a broken body out on runs for PT all the time. I would tell my Soldiers to seek mental health if they were going through something, but I would just push my feelings down and grind through it. I would give my Soldiers time off for their anniversaries or children's birthdays, but I wouldn't take those days off myself. In short, I was being a hypocrite and the worst part was that my Soldiers noticed. What I was telling them through my actions was that it was ok to take care of yourself and family, but if you wanted to be a good leader, you don't do those things. After that was pointed out to me, I started allowing myself to seek the same levels of care and work-life balance that I allowed my Soldiers. I became better at work and related to my Soldiers better. I still continued to be valuable and received promotions to higher levels of responsibility. Good leaders don't want to

break their Soldiers, and that probably includes your boss, so don't be a hypocrite when it comes to taking care of yourself.

CSM Raymond Harris, Training and Doctrine Command: In the summer of 2014, I was fortunate enough to be selected for my first CSM position straight out of the Sergeants Major Academy. I was supposed to serve as an Operations Sergeant Major but was activated shortly after assignments were given to serve as a BN CSM at the 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii. It was a dream job, and I was fired up to get after some good combat training and to lead a Stryker-Turned light infantry organization. I wanted to build a team that was grounded in tactical skills, were professionals, and were cared for…but our primary purpose was to fight and win when called upon, so that was the guiding principle. At that time, not to sound brash, but I was good at my job and my mental capacity to analyze, interpret, and act on orders and/or data very quickly was pretty big. I can take a lot in and put a lot out. I just mentally saw how it had to be done and moved out tasking my 1SGs to tackle the problem and they did just that. To this day they were some of the best 1SGs I have ever seen, and I relied heavily on them to not only ensure that training was conducted to a high standard, but also to ensure the Soldiers and families were cared for. What I did not realize at the time was that I was burning them out. Between me giving them tasks, their commanders giving them tasks, and all the in-between, they were simply overloaded, and the preverbal candle was truly burning at both ends.

One day, one of my 1SG's stopped in the office for a talk. He was a highly trusted and respected 1SG in the battalion…my go to 1SG. The conversation centered around being over tasked and how they (all the 1SGs) needed breathing room to think, develop, and lead their formations. He was very candid, which is a quality that I revere in my leaders, about how it was going. These comments really resonated with me when he leaned in and said, "CSM, how fast do you run?" I was not sure where this was going, but I said around a 13:15 2-mile. He said, "well that is pretty fast and how fast do you think your 1SG's or the Soldiers run?" Without him having to finish his point it sank in. I was out running or pacing my leaders, not actual running, but in capacity and years of experience. What I failed to do when I got into the position is truly understand the capabilities of my subordinate leaders, develop them so we all would be on the same plane and able to row in the right direction.

I use that example constantly when I counsel Sergeants Major and is easily the best advice I have ever received and is a core principle in how I lead daily. I ask all of you to think about how fast you run. There is right

pace, too fast or too slow may not be the best…how do you affect your own speed to create cohesion and synergy? How do you coach and mentor others to up their game?

CSM Tammy Everette, Commandant, NCO Leadership Center of Excellence: The best advice I received as an NCO was to do the best as whatever I was assigned to do. Sometimes we get wrapped up in the title of the position versus just focusing on our work ethic and the outcomes of our work.

CSM Jonathan Reffeor, 3ID: The best advice I've received didn't come in a single sentence but through repeated guidance, consistent challenge and hard-earned lessons from seasoned leaders.

One of the most impactful pieces of advice came from a senior leader who once told me, "Not everyone thinks like you—or cares as much as you do. You've got to find a way to motivate them without sacrificing their emotional intelligence." That statement forced me to grow not just as a leader but as a person. I began to understand that leadership isn't about expecting Soldiers to mirror your drive—it's about learning how to reach them where they are, and helping them rise to a higher standard without compromising their individuality.

Leadership starts with connection. That means taking time to truly know your Soldiers—their strengths, motivations and challenges—and investing in their development. It also means setting the example, shoulder to shoulder. You don't just give orders—you demonstrate what right looks like, and in doing so, you earn their respect. The Soldiers who see you uphold the standard are the ones who will follow you through hardship and, in turn, support you when leadership gets hard.

I've also carried with me this truth: somewhere in the world, there's an enemy counterpart preparing just as hard, living a life similar to yours. You owe it to your team never to be outworked. Readiness is more than a buzzword—it's a daily commitment. And finally, never underestimate the importance of being a team builder. Leadership isn't just about improving your squad—it's about elevating your entire formation, enforcing discipline and accountability, and thriving in whatever conditions or unit you find yourself in.

In short, the best advice I've received reminds me to lead with empathy, enforce with integrity, train with purpose, and serve with humility. The job of an NCO is never to be the loudest in the room—but to be the one who connects, inspires, and outworks every obstacle to build and sustain combat-ready, resilient Soldiers.

CSM Shawn Carns, CSM: "No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care." A First Sergeant told me that when I was a hot-headed young Staff Sergeant who thought being tough was the only way. It changed my entire leadership philosophy. Competence is crucial, but compassion is what builds loyalty.

SGM Melendez, Department of the Army G2: Worry only about what you are responsible for and can influence! One of my mentors as a young NCO highlighted the fact that I was always trying to, as he said it, "solve world hunger". He taught me to focus on everything in my "sphere of influence". If I can control it, I should own it and worry about it. To focus my time and energy to accomplishing the task, taking care of my Soldiers, and not waste precious time and energy worrying about things I could not control.

6. Question: What's the worst advice you have received as an NCO?

Robert: Be loyal to those with whom I serve. Wait, isn't that in the NCO Creed? How can that be bad advice? Well, I'll tell you, it's bad advice because loyalty is a double-edged sword, and I have seen it used too many times to get junior leaders to display loyalty to their boss, when in fact they should have been showing loyalty to the Army and the US Constitution. While on the surface, loyalty is a good thing, and it is a needed value for Soldiers to hold, it is often misplaced. I actually got cursed out and told that I was not being loyal once because I asked an officer about an issue a Sergeant Major had already given me advice on (bad advice might add). I always said, if I ever became the Sergeant Major of the Army, I would replace loyalty with humility.

Richard: NCO business is NCO business. If you don't know by now, that's code for playing in a grey area and doing something shady. Don't do it. Either you will get caught and then face the consequence, or you will get away with it, but you will condition yourself to believe that the only way to get something done is to do it in a shady way.

CSM Tammy Everette, Commandant, NCO Leadership Center of Excellence: To mind my own business and stay in my lane. What does that even mean? Soldiers are my business, so if they need assistance, that's my business. NCOs should not get too territorial; if you aren't handling your business, someone else will.

CSM Jonathan Reffeor, 3ID: Bad advice can often disguise itself as tradition or authority—and for a young noncommissioned officer, the impact of such guidance can be long-lasting if left unchallenged. Over time, I've learned that some of the most damaging advice I received didn't just mislead me; it undermined the core values of leadership, trust and respect.

One example came early in my career when I was told not to shake hands with subordinates because it would "degrade my power base." The belief was that showing respect made you appear weak. I rejected that notion then—and I reject it now. Extending a handshake is not a sign of weakness, but one of mutual respect. Treating Soldiers with dignity fosters trust and builds cohesion; that's leadership, not compromise.

Another troubling message I encountered was the idea that officers are "in the profession," and NCOs should focus solely on middle management. That advice failed to recognize the expertise, mentorship and operational leadership NCOs provide across the formation. We are not

mere functionaries; we are stewards of readiness, developers of people and custodians of the Army's standards.

Lastly, the phrase "just figure it out" may sound like resilience in disguise, but in reality, it dismisses the value of mentorship and shared knowledge. While self-reliance matters, leaders are responsible for educating, equipping and empowering—not leaving subordinates to navigate critical challenges without guidance.

The worst advice I've received stands as a reminder of how important it is to question outdated norms and lead with intention. NCOs don't just enforce standards—they set them. And that means rejecting anything that undermines the professionalism, humanity or purpose of our role.

CSM Shawn Carns, CAC: "Just smoke 'em. It'll fix the attitude." Corrective training has its place, but using it as a lazy, catch-all solution for every problem is a failure of leadership. It breeds resentment, not discipline. It shows you're unwilling to do the hard work of finding the root cause of an issue.

SGM Melendez, Department of the Army G2: I once had a senior NCO say to me "Keep your eye in the future". Thankfully I had a mentor who told me to do the opposite. Too many NCOs are constantly focused on their next job, or the job they wish they had. This often affects their performance in the job they have. My mentor told me to just be the best at whatever role the Army needed me to perform right now and let my performance speak for itself. This does not mean you don't seek ways to improve yourself. You should constantly seek ways to improve, educate and prepare for future opportunities, but not at the expense of the job you have today. Just be best at it and the job you want, and often other roles you may not know exist, will be offered to you.

7. Question: What do you wish you had known when you were a young NCO?

Robert: That I did not need to be perfect in everything that I did. That yelling at those in my charge did not motivate them. That smashing a piece of equipment due to my frustration sets a poor example and is counterproductive (that was only last week by the way…I'm still learning…I hope). That I didn't need to be at work as long as my boss. That I wouldn't be smarter if I earned a degree. That I didn't need to run 40 miles a week to be in good shape (I'm paying for that one now). That I was not expected to have all of the answers (at any level) and that it is okay to think about a complex problem for a little while. That words don't matter as much as actions, but people will judge you by both. That there is a significant difference between confidence and competence, and the more you have of one, the less you tend to have of the other. That few people would advocate on my behalf, but rather would favor people like themselves (race, religion, sex, education, MOS, etc.). That relationships with others are more important than knowing about relationships with others. That I should enjoy my children while they are small, and that I should take the time to talk with my family while they are alive.

This is a long list, but I wish I knew them all when I was younger.

Richard: Leaders are human, and therefore, fallible. Do not assume anyone is perfect and do not put leaders on a pedestal that they can fall off of. It is good to look up to the good leaders in your chain of command and your NCO support channel, but you cannot rebuke them the first time they make a mistake. Everyone makes mistakes and you will too. Treat your leaders with the same respect and understanding you want your Soldiers to treat you with.

CSM Tammy Everette, Commandant, NCO Leadership Center of Excellence: I can't think of one specific thing I wish I had known as a young NCO, but if I had the chance to do it all over again, I would have chosen to be a little more present for my family. I made a lot of decisions early on without regard to anyone or anything other than my career. It all worked out in the end, but as I reflect on my journey, there is time I can't make up and memories I can't recreate.

CSM Jonathan Reffeor, 3ID: Every noncommissioned officer begins their journey with a sharp learning curve, often driven by pride, pressure and a deep desire to lead well. Looking back, there are a few hard-earned lessons I wish I'd understood early in my career—lessons that would have made me a more effective leader, mentor and Soldier.

First and foremost: it's OK to fail. As a new NCO, I approached every mission with a "no-fail" mentality. That mindset, while rooted in commitment, led me to be unreasonably hard on my Soldiers—even when they gave their best effort. Over time, that lack of grace eroded trust. I didn't yet realize that failure, when embraced as part of growth, builds stronger individuals and stronger teams. The best leaders don't avoid failure—they use it to teach, reinforce resilience and guide progress.

I also learned that rank alone means very little. Stripes may get you in the room, but respect and competence are what earn you a seat at the table. Your Soldiers, your peers, and even your seniors watch how you carry yourself when no one else is looking. Leadership is measured in presence, in consistency, and in the small decisions that shape unit culture. What you say—or don't say—sets the tone. What you allow—or fail to correct—defines the climate. Your influence begins long before you speak.

Finally, I wish I had truly understood the value of long-term planning—both professionally and personally. No one handed me a career map or taught me how to leverage training opportunities, schools or duty assignments to expand my portfolio. Likewise, no one told me how critical it would be to budget wisely and invest in my financial future. These are lessons many of us learn through trial and error, but they shouldn't be left to chance.

If I could speak to my younger self, I'd say this: give your Soldiers room to stumble and space to grow. Lead by example, not entitlement. And don't wait until it's convenient to take control of your career—it won't be. The sooner you realize your influence, the greater your impact.

CSM Shawn Carns, CAC: I wish I had understood that it's okay not to have all the answers. As a young Sergeant, I thought I had to be infallible. That pressure leads to bad decisions and a fear of asking for help. True strength is knowing your weaknesses and relying on your team and your seniors. Your soldiers will respect your honesty more than your pretense of perfection.

8. Question: Where do junior NCOs find mentorship in their current assignment?

CSM Tammy Everette, Commandant, NCO Leadership Center of Excellence: Junior NCOs should seek mentorship from someone they respect and look up to. This can be someone in the same unit or not. I normally tell soldiers to seek mentorship outside of their organization. This allows them to get input that is not clouded by unit norms or biased/influenced by needs of the organization. I also recommend that NCOs have more than one mentor. You may need a mentor to give you specific CMF-related guidance or one to give you unfiltered life advice and guidance; those may not be the same person.

CSM Jonathan Reffeor, 3ID: The most accessible and impactful mentorship often exists within a junior NCO's immediate organization. Senior NCOs who demonstrate integrity, competence and humility can serve as critical role models. Identifying those leaders—and observing how they lead, communicate and care for Soldiers—offers real-time insight into successful leadership.

Beyond the unit, junior NCOs are encouraged to engage with networks such as the Sergeant Audie Murphy Association. This elite group represents the top tier of NCO leadership and provides access to mentorship grounded in excellence, service and tradition. Investing time around these leaders can shape not only an NCO's skill set, but their sense of identity within the Corps.

CSM Shawn Carns, CAC: Mentorship is not passive. It doesn't just happen to you.

Look Up and Across: Your mentor doesn't have to be your rater or in your direct chain of command.

- **Look at the other Platoon Sergeants, the First Sergeant, the Battalion CSM.**
- **Look at the Warrant Officers.**
- **Look at sharp NCOs in other companies.**

Be a Good Mentee: Be professional, be prepared, and be respectful of their time. Don't just show up to complain. Show up with thoughtful questions. Ask for advice on a specific problem. Ask to shadow them for a day.

Provide Value: The best mentorship is a two-way street. You might know the new generation of soldiers better than they do. Offer them your perspective.

9. Question: How do you balance mission and people?

CSM Tammy Everette, Commandant, NCO Leadership Center of Excellence: When I talk about mission and people, I don't use the word "balance." The very definition of balance is an equal distribution of weight. Over my 29-year career, I have learned that it is impossible to equally focus on mission accomplishment and the needs of people. I prefer to redirect the conversation towards expectations and predictability. It has been my experience that there are times when we have to be all in on the mission and there are times when we can dedicate time to personal affairs. The secret sauce is knowing your soldiers, communicating expectations, and focusing on the must-dos. The must-dos are events that won't happen again—weddings, funerals, graduations, CTC rotations, deployments. Must-dos require full attention and commitment. Outside of must-dos, leaders must know their soldiers and provide them the opportunity to handle personal affairs while also being integral members of the team.

CSM Jonathan Reffeor, 3ID: Balance does not mean equal weight every day. Some situations demand overwhelming effort toward the mission, while others call for investing more in people. Effective leaders understand that "balance" means being appropriately responsive to shifting priorities without neglecting either side. Knowing when to lean into one without permanently sidelining the other is a leadership art honed by experience and emotional intelligence.

A leader cannot apply balance without clarity. That means knowing the Commander's intent and having a deep understanding of your Soldiers—who they are, what they're capable of, and how they process information. That insight shapes not only decision-making but mission outcomes. At its core, leadership is a people business. Accomplishing the mission and taking care of Soldiers are not competing priorities—they are interdependent. When leaders learn to synchronize both with intentionality, their teams remain ready, resilient and built to endure.

CSM Shawn Carns, CAC: This is a false choice. You are presented with this question as if it's a scale you have to balance. It is not. ***The people are the mission.*** A well-led, well-trained, and well-cared-for unit will accomplish any mission you put in front of them. If you sacrifice your people for the mission, you will soon have neither. By investing in your soldiers, training them, developing them, ensuring their welfare—you are directly investing in mission readiness.

10. Question: What does "taking care of Soldiers" really mean?

Robert: This phrase means everything to everyone. And is uttered at least three to four times a day by most Army leaders. Therefore, "taking care of Soldiers" can mean anything from providing additional physical training to helping a new private create a budget. What "taking care of Soldiers" does not mean however is giving them everything they want (more time off, easy training, automatic promotions, free lattes in the day room, etc.). Simply put, "taking care of Soldiers" means that their basic needs required to be a Soldier have been met, and they can now focus on accomplishing their mission. Now, if you will excuse me, I must "take care of some Soldiers."

Richard: Taking care of Soldiers looks different to every leader. I would say at the bare minimum, taking care of Soldiers means ensuring their safety and wellbeing (within the limits that military service allows), helping them to grow personally and professionally, and educating and training them to be able to conduct their duties as well as the duties of their next hire.

CSM Raymond Harris, Training and Doctrine Command: Soldier welfare must be seen in multiple human domains; psychological, emotional, job satisfaction, relationships, and personal growth. A leader needs to identify these needs and each Soldier being mentored is different in what is important to them, but again one thing is constant and that is that all leaders must deliver tough and realistic training in harsh conditions to prepare our Soldiers for our CORE mission…defense of the nation.

Serving as a Drill Sergeant truly made me an effective leader. I mean I think I was good before then, but everyone in my squad had the same mentality, so it was easy to lead them…we were warfighters, and we wanted to train! On the trail, you quickly get see the differences in society and must work hard both as a collective and individual effort to turn a civilian into a Soldier. There is no one size shoe that fits all when it comes to changing their thought process or getting them to buy-in into the Army culture, values, and ethos…it takes work and effort. So understanding the total picture of "Caring for Soldiers" is important to balance where leaders place their focus.

CSM Tammy Everette, Commandant, NCO Leadership Center of Excellence: It means ensuring they are trained and ready to conduct their mission, whatever that mission entails. It means ensuring all their affairs are in order, so they are focused on the mission. It means knowing your soldiers so you can truly lead them effectively—what motivates them,

how do they learn, what are their strengths and weaknesses, what are their goals. When I ever question how to lead/take care of a soldier, I simply ask myself, "What would I do if this was my child?"

CSM Jonathan Reffeor, 3ID: To take care of Soldiers is to assume nothing. Every individual has different experiences, expectations and support networks. Leaders must train their Soldiers with rigor and purpose, using the most realistic and demanding methods available—not for the sake of difficulty, but to build a foundation so strong the basics can't be performed incorrectly. The goal is always the same: to bring every Soldier home safely and make them better, both professionally and personally. Taking care of Soldiers is practical as much as it is personal. It includes ensuring pay is correct, housing is safe and stable, and distractions are minimized so focus remains on the mission. It's supporting mental, physical and emotional readiness and modeling resilience every day. It's preparing Soldiers for the worst day they may ever face, while offering the tools and toughness to overcome it.

SGM Petra M. Casarez, Deputy Chief of Staff, G-4 SGM: Taking care of Soldiers encompasses a comprehensive commitment to their overall well-being: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. This involves providing essential resources like access to quality healthcare, opportunities for professional development and career advancement, and support for their families. Leaders play a crucial role in fostering a positive and supportive environment built on trust, respect, and clear, honest communication. This includes regular feedback and mentorship to guide Soldiers' growth and development. Importantly, taking care of Soldiers also means equipping them for a successful future, regardless of whether they choose to continue their Army career or transition to civilian life, through educational opportunities, career counseling, and transition assistance programs. It's about empowering Soldiers with the tools and support they need to thrive both during and after their service.

CSM Shawn Carns, CAC: It's the most important phrase in the NCO creed, and it's often misunderstood.

It means tough, realistic training. Coddling soldiers gets them killed. Taking care of them means making them sweat, bleed, and push past their limits in training so they can dominate on the battlefield.

It means enforcing standards. Holding soldiers accountable is taking care of them. It ensures fairness, good order, and discipline, which is the bedrock of any effective unit.

It means professional development. Sending them to schools, preparing them for promotion boards, counseling them on their careers. You are their first career counselor.

It means checking on their holistic health. Are they sleeping? Are they eating right? Are their finances in order? Is their family doing okay? It's about treating them as a whole person, not just a uniform.

11. Question: What is your opinion on open-door policies, how should NCOs navigate them, and what are considerations to keep in mind?

Robert: I think open-door policies are great, and people should take advantage of them as much as possible. As a younger Soldier, I always thought the open door policy was a trap, and that the unit leadership did not really want to talk with me about my concerns, or that they would not allow me to be anonymous in my complaint. As I became a senior NCO, a first sergeant, and a command sergeant major, my opinion changed. I wanted people to see me using the open door-policy so that I could take action before the problem got out of hand. Thus, my advice for navigating open-door policy is that it is far better to bring up an issue when it arises than wait until the issue becomes the size of Godzillia and needs a whole company's worth of resources to deal with.

Richard: One of the things that upsets me is when a leader states that they have an open door policy, but then makes it incredibly difficult for a Soldier to see that leader. I had a leader once that would require a written statement of what the Soldier wanted to discuss, that had to be sent up, read, and approved by every leader between the Soldier and the leader. There were no exceptions. Once Soldier sent a request because they felt like their Squad Leader was mistreating the members of the Squad. By the time the request got to the "leader" the Soldier had changed their story to "everything is fine and I was just overreacting". The Commander actually bought that and decided that the Squad leader had it all under control, which they did, but not the way the commander thought. Or maybe exactly how they thought.

CSM Tammy Everette, Commandant, NCO Leadership Center of Excellence: Open-door policies are a regulatory requirement. In my current role as the NCOLCoE Commandant, although required, I am not a fan of open-door policies. I say this because it has been my experience that NCOs use this policy to skip the entire chain of command. If we don't try to solve problems at the lowest level, how can we expect soldiers to even trust their leaders will help them? Just because you can have access to someone, doesn't mean you should always access them; the NCO Support Channel exists for a reason.

Aside from that, NCOs should be careful not to deny soldiers the opportunity to use the open-door policy.

CSM Jonathan Reffeor, 3ID: When used effectively, they allow Soldiers to voice concerns, seek guidance, or report issues that may not be

addressed at lower levels. But with that access comes responsibility—both for the Soldier who steps through the door and the leader who answers it. Most issues raised through open-door channels often stem from simple miscommunication. In many cases, those concerns should have been resolved by the chain of command. As noncommissioned officers, it is our duty to exhaust every reasonable effort to resolve problems at our level before they escalate. That said, when a Soldier exercises their right to use the open-door policy, the NCO's role is to facilitate—not obstruct the conversation while ensuring accurate and ethical handling of the situation.

Leaders must approach every open-door interaction with care. Before diving into a discussion, it is vital to set clear conditions. Begin by determining whether the subject involves sensitive or protected categories such as SHARP, EO, or potential legal violations. If so, immediately refer the Soldier to the appropriate subject matter expert. If not, ask the Soldier to clearly state their goal: What do they hope to achieve from this discussion? From there, listen actively, take notes, limit assumptions, and allow time to investigate and provide thoughtful feedback. It's important to remember that every story has multiple perspectives: the Soldier's version, the leader's version, and the truth—often somewhere in between. NCOs are uniquely positioned to navigate these complexities. Their understanding of both policy and people enables them to address concerns pragmatically while maintaining command integrity.

While open-door policies are essential, they must be used with discipline. They should never become a workaround for the chain of command, nor a tool for undermining authority. When used wisely, they reinforce trust and show Soldiers that their voices matter—and that leaders are ready to listen and act. Ultimately, effective NCOs treat the open-door policy not as a burden, but as an opportunity—to resolve, to educate, and to lead from the front.

CSM Shawn Carns, CAC: An open-door policy from a Commander is an excellent tool for transparency and ensuring soldiers feel they have a voice. However, it can also be misused and undermine the NCO support channel if not managed correctly. NCOs should embrace it, not fear it. A Commander's open door is a safety net. Your goal should be to handle issues so effectively at your level that your soldiers never feel the need to use it.

12. Question: How can NCOs teach young soldiers how to be their own advocates and champions throughout their military experience?

Robert: I recommend taking full advantage of counseling sessions to talk about the things you have done, and the things you hope to accomplish. The best way to do this is to keep a running list of activities that you complete. When it is time for your counseling, pick out the important things on that list, and provide it to your boss ahead of your scheduled counseling. When you do this, take the approach that you are simply informing them of some of the things you feel are important that you did rather than a bragging approach. There is a fine line between bragging and informing, do your best not to cross it.

Another, and even better approach to advocacy is to do such a good job that other people will be your voice. This will keep you on the right side of the informing-bragging line, and allow you to stay humbler about your accomplishments. When contemplating doing a really good job of something, I would always ask myself, "how can I make this the best _____ in the Army?" Not the company, not the battalion, not the brigade, but the Army. I would usually come up with a few ideas and sometimes be able to implement one or two. In probably every case, I was never the best in the Army, but I was still really good. Over time, I earned a reputation for not only getting things done but doing them in such a way that the outcome always exceeded expectations.

Richard: Our military culture is driven by the idea of humility and selflessness. Neither of those desirable traits work well with self-advocating. Like Rob, I have been very bad at this during my time in the Army. I am starting to get it now, but it still makes me feel narcissistic and egotistical. What I would remind any Soldier that is struggling with self-advocating is that sometimes you SHOULD get the credit you deserve. It doesn't matter if it's a new position, an award, a good NCOER, or anything else. If you think you deserve it, have a conversation with the person who is denying you. Sometimes, our vocation does not yield the results we hoped for, but trying does make it feel better and help you realize what you can do better next time.

CSM Tammy Everette, Commandant, NCO Leadership Center of Excellence: Every young soldier should have a mentor or advocate to help them navigate their career. However, there is no better advocate for yourself than yourself. To do this effectively, you must know what you want. What are your short term and long term goals? You must read. You must understand Army systems and processes to be your own advocate—do

you know the promotion system? Do you understand assignment/manning cycles? How do you request a specific school or training? It is simply impossible to champion your own success if you don't know how to achieve your own goals.

CSM Jonathan Reffeor, 3ID: It starts with accountability. NCOs must instill in their Soldiers that they are not powerless. Every action has a consequence, and Soldiers are responsible for the decisions they make—on and off duty. Building this sense of ownership early empowers individuals to raise concerns, question procedures and seek help when needed without fear or hesitation. Leadership isn't about removing friction; it's about showing Soldiers how to respond to it with purpose.

Self-advocacy thrives where resilience lives. Most things worth achieving in the Army come through hardship, discomfort and effort. When NCOs lead from the front—demonstrating perseverance in difficult situations—they model the kind of determination that young Soldiers will mirror. Resilient Soldiers, forged in hard-earned experience, are more likely to speak up, seek resources and champion their own growth throughout their service.

SGM Melendez, Department of the Army G2: Lead by example. Show them what right looks like. Teach them how to train, counsel, and prepare them to replace you as the leader. Read and understand Army doctrine and regulations. Not just to regurgitate at a promotion board, but to gain better understanding of your mission and role. Show them that by focusing on their job right now and being the best at it, will allow them to shine and other opportunities will be afforded to them.

Appendix C

NCODP/LPD Suggestions

The noncommissioned officer development program (NCODP) is the responsibility of the senior NCO in any formation. At the battalion level, this usually means conducting a one– or two–hour session about once per month depending on what higher is providing. We have seen brigades offer sessions quarterly or on a biannual schedule. When I (Robert) was assigned to a division staff, our division CSM offered one session a year. Regardless of the schedule and who is providing the session, a good program will offer NCOs around one session per month. The Army refers to this development in the context of the operational domain. This type of program is critical to the development of quality noncommissioned officers (the institutional domain cannot shape character the way the operational domain can), but neither of us has experienced a quality program (except when we were in charge of course – sarcasm).

As a master sergeant, I (Robert) once endured a professional development session titled "*How to Read an LES*." It was at this moment that I realized we need to do better. To this unit's credit, we had a program, and we had sessions every month, but the content was either inappropriate for the development of NCOs or farmed out to other organizations on post. Unfortunately, the "farming out" approach is the "easy button" when it comes to NCODP (think of the number of sessions you have experienced that were taught by organizations outside of your NCO support channel). While some classes are appropriate, and even best taught by outside organizations, we suggest this should not be the "go to" approach for a quality development program.

To help you with this, here is a list of a few sessions we believe would be useful at the battalion level. This is in no way a complete list. They are, in addition to the discussion questions provided at the end of each of the preceding chapters, will structure sessions that we have seen work well that are non-MOS specific.

1. What the IG is and What They Can Do for Soldiers (more than just a place to report complaints)
2. What is Legal, and What They Can Do for Soldiers (more than just a place to visit when in trouble)
3. How to Develop a Leadership Philosophy
4. Servant Leadership (James C. Hunter)

5. The Five Levels of Leadership & How to Reach Them (John Maxwell)
6. The History of the Noncommissioned Officer (can be multiple sessions)
7. AR 670-1: *Wear and Appearance of the Army Uniform*
8. The Enlisted Promotion Process and Evaluations
9. Awards: When and How to Write Them
10. Communication Problems and How to Mitigate Them
11. How to Have Difficult Conversations
12. Enabling Your Counseling Skills with A.I. (using technology as a tool, not a shortcut)
13. The Arbinger Pyramid of Influence
14. Movement and Maneuver Fundamentals
15. Basic Intelligence (WfF) for Leaders
16. Sustainment Operations: Leading Logistical Support
17. Fires: Coordinating Indirect Fire and Effects
18. Protection: Force Protection and Risk Management
19. Mission Command (Command and Control Overview)
20. Principles of Mission Command (mutual trust, shared understanding, disciplined initiative, competence, risk acceptance, use mission orders)
21. Implementing the Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) Program
22. Applying Emotional Intelligence in Leadership
23. Leading Multi-Generational Teams
24. Conflict Resolution and Mediation Techniques
25. Mentorship: Developing the Next Generation of Leaders
26. Coaching vs. Counseling: When and How to Use Each
27. Time Management and Prioritization for Leaders
28. Decision-Making Under Stress
29. Leading Soldiers in Hybrid/Complex Environments
30. Ethical Decision-Making and Integrity in Leadership
31. Leading Change: Overcoming Resistance in Units
32. Resilience Training for Leaders and Soldiers

33. Cross-Cultural Leadership and Communication
34. Leveraging Technology to Enhance Training and Readiness
35. Personal and Professional Development Plans: Setting Goals and Tracking Progress
36. Army Design Methodology or the Military Decision-Making Process
37. Unit History
38. A Staff Ride (Contact Army University Press for assistance)

About the Authors

Kate Dahlstrand grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee and joined the US Army as a combat medic in 1999. Her first squad leader, SGT Simmons taught her how to be a competent soldier with a committed work ethic. SSG Rob Nelson taught her what compassionate leadership looked like in practice. SSG Wanda Harvey taught her how to be an asset to an organization and lead in the absence of orders. She currently works as the managing editor and historian for the Research and Books Team of Army University Press, in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Robert Nelson grew up in Susanville, California and joined the Army as a combat medic in 1993. SSG William Bellis taught him about dedication to the Army and how to have high standards. SFC Jennifer Nelson taught him about taking care of Solders, time management, and organization. 1SG Alvin Holman taught him how to lead a company. 1SG Donna Brock taught him how to treat Soldiers with dignity and respect and how to fully commit to an organization. He currently works as the Department Chair for the Department of Army Operations at the Sergeant's Major Academy in Fort Bliss, Texas.

Kenneth O. Preston grew up in Mount Savage, Maryland and joined the US Army as an armor crewman and later a cavalry scout (11E & 11D) in 1975. His first tank commander, SGT Dale Stark, taught him everything he needed to be, know, and do to become an NCO and subject matter expert on the tank. SFC Hugh (Skip) Ashton taught him advanced platoon gunnery and maneuver tactics in preparation for the defense of Western Europe and gave him the opportunity to serve as a tank commander. First Sergeant Gary P. Pastine taught him standards and how to be a model NCO and company master gunner. He currently serves as a senior fellow for the Association of the United States Army and is the CEO for Savage Mountain Business Coaching.

Richard J. Russell II is a California Native who joined the Army to serve his country in 1999. A few individuals who helped shape SGM Russell's leadership philosophy are 1SG (Ret) Tim Hodges, who demonstrated leadership with heart and swagger, SGM (Ret) Rob Nelson, who is the epitome of the warrior scholar, and LTC (ret) Douglas Fullerton who showed what a positive command relationship can look like when both parties are committed to making things work. Currently, SGM Russell serves as the Assistant Dean of Academics Operation Sergeant Major at the Sergeants Major Academy.

Robert F. Williams grew up in the Evergreen State and entered the army as an infantryman in 2000. His first platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Jeffrey Myhre taught him what empathetic servant leadership looked like, a trait he tried to emulate throughout his career. Others, such as First Sergeant and later Command Sergeant Major Mitchell Rucker and Travis Cooke continued to reinforce those lessons under fire and across different units. This personal education in military leadership played an important role in his work as a historian, where he now researches and writes army history for Army University Press at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.