



Maj. Jacob E. White salutes during pass in review 8 February 2018 as part of the activation ceremony for the 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade at Fort Benning, Georgia. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

Where Field Grade Officers Get Their Power

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Leadership seeks to influence others through the communication of ideas and common causes. Positive, empowering influence comes by knowing how to lead, relate to others, and free others to manage tasks.

—Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership*

Command and General Staff Officer Course (CGSOC) graduates are expected to fulfill three crucial roles for the U.S. Army: they must be able to solve complex problems, build teams, and develop other leaders in order to meet the challenges of the future. These roles are reflected in the outcomes

for the CGSOC.¹ The focus of this article is on how field grade officers draw their “organizational power,” or influence, in order to solve those problems, build those teams, and develop other leaders after their CGSOC graduation. The backdrop for this discussion is the Army’s urgency to grow not just capability but readiness to fight and win against threats to the Nation. This specifically includes the ability to plan and conduct division- and corps-level operations against a peer or near-peer adversary threat with matching, or in some cases, overmatching military capabilities. To do this, the Army needs a vibrant, highly competent, critical thinking, professional core of field grade officers.

When does the Army recognize its officers as being fully vested in the profession of arms? One proposition is that this recognition takes place at the same time an officer is promoted to the rank of major, which is also the same time he or she attends the CGSOC at the Command and General Staff School.

The resident CGSOC is for educating and training the top basic branch officers in warfighting. This year-long graduate-level course has three parts. The first part is the Common Core (three and a half months) course that focuses on enterprise-level Army and joint processes. It also provides the Joint Professional Military Education (JMPE1) accreditation. The second part of the school year begins with individual basic-branch preparation courses that serve to both finish company grade officers in their branch’s doctrine and latest techniques in order to prepare them to operate as part of a notional division staff during the next phase of the year. The Advanced Operations Course (four months) follows and is the resident CGSOC main effort. This accrediting eighteen-week intensive program is designed to produce basic branch officers that understand large-scale combat operations at the division, corps, and brigade levels. Regardless of the mode of education (resident, satellite, distance, or Total Army School System), attendance at CGSOC marks a turning point in an officer’s career.

Attendance at CGSOC is significant as it occurs after the officer is beyond their obligated service point. The average CGSOC student in 2018 has nine to ten years in the Army. This professional time frame means the officer-students at CGSOC choose to attend a graduate-level professional education program. CGSOC students are credentialed as professionals by both senior Army leaders during the Army-level

board selection process and then by the Command and General Staff College faculty during the school year.

New CGSOC graduates, now considered fully vested in the profession of arms, find themselves in positions where their leadership must be exhibited by influence rather than by direction. Nonetheless, the Army expects these “iron majors” to effectively display influence, or “organizational power,” to solve problems, build teams, and develop leaders. Why do some officers succeed in accomplishing these three critical tasks while others do not? Controlling for a strong work ethic and a strong moral underpinning, what is it that makes a field grade leader successful?

Our answer is that a powerful and influential leader exudes confidence and competence in such a way that inspires others to listen and take actions accordingly. This skill set is learnable and repeatable. Our formula for organizational power and influence is expressed algebraically in the figure (on page 111).

On Language

The language component of the formula has two parts. First, the ability to read and write, clearly and concisely, in proper English; and second, the precise usage of the technical language associated with the specific military branch, unit or task to which the officer is assigned.

Clear and concise English writing brings clarity in defining and solving problems. CGSOC is designed to build on the skills of already highly successful captains and majors by increasing their ability to write and speak for a broader audience. The majority

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of the basic branch student officers are versed at writing for the tactical level (battalion and brigade). Unfortunately, at the tactical levels, PowerPoint and bullet sentences tend to rule the day. The influential field grade officer, however, understands the need to be able to write for a broader audience. Proper writing brings stability, orderliness, and clarity to thinking that is needed to define and solve problems. In other words, good writing promotes good thinking.

As a field grade leader, communication skills are no longer simple commands to subordinates that at least share some understanding of the problem being dealt with. The audience beyond company grade is much broader and, in many cases, does not share the point of view or have the same equities in addressing the problem at hand. PowerPoint slides, while helpful, cannot take the place of clearly written orders, white papers, or well-given briefings. In many cases, the CGSOC graduate's staff products will travel far beyond the unit or context where they originated. Therefore, in order to exercise appropriate influence, field grade officers must be able to write and speak clearly and concisely to save time and foster understanding. In conjunction, they must develop habits

that enhance the efficient use of time that is critical in developing overall effectiveness.

Students plan for a division-level defense in a contested region 5 February 2019 during the Advanced Operations Course at the Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The thirty-two-hour exercise spanned seven days and was the culminating event of this block. After completing the Advanced Operations Course, the students are considered "fully credentialed" as staff officers. (Photo by Danielle Powell, Army University Press)

that enhance the efficient use of time that is critical in developing overall effectiveness.

Management of time is critical to the officers, the teams they lead, and their bosses at the field-grade level. This means clarity must rule the day from beginning to end when speaking and briefing. CGSOC graduates must be able to communicate their cogent thoughts and ideas without delay in order to gain the required influence to lead teams of peers effectively.

Using correct technical language is the second part of the language component of influence. Proper understanding and usage of the technical language associated with specific branches, units, and problem sets reflects the credentials of the CGSOC graduate. Every time an officer speaks, he or she is being judged by not only the

Organizational influence = Poise (language + critical thinking skills + context)

(Figure by authors)

Figure. Organizational Power and Influence Formula

team members in the organization but also by the boss and by the officer's peers. Precisely delivered technical language sets the basis for displaying strong technical and tactical competence, and this creates an intellectual opportunity for the field grade officer.

The burden of translation falls firmly on the speaker, not the audience. For example, when under tactical conditions, the CGSOC graduate is expected to understand the doctrinal language related to large-scale combat operations and converse using the proper acronyms and technical terms relating to both concepts and materiel. Similarly, when under different circumstances, such as participation in a discussion on technical administrative labor-relations conditions, the graduate is expected to learn and speak the appropriate jargon correctly. Each of these situations, as well as others, requires a different set of technical language skills; the tactical language appropriate to large-scale combat operations is not interchangeable with that required for effective labor-relations engagements.

On the other hand, mastering the proper technical language and employing the jargon and language appropriate to the circumstances effectively opens the door for influence with the discrete audiences to which such language pertains. This is where the course of instruction at CGSOC brings value to its graduates in that it exposes students to the joint force, strategy, and the enterprise level of the Army, as well as deep immersion in the mechanics of fighting at the tactical level. The result is that graduates are conversant in many technical languages across the Department of Defense and even international spheres.

As an end state, CGSOC graduates are expected to be able to speak and write clearly and precisely in the English language, as well as to be proficient in the technical vernacular of their profession. CGSOC offer students the chance to greatly increase their skills via the numerous written and verbally delivered requirements throughout the year. This ability starts the officer's bid

for credibility, and in the end, it gives him or her a seat at the table and an opportunity to contribute substantively to the discussion.

On Critical-Thinking Skills

Field grade officers open their bid for influence with their language skills, but critical-thinking skills come quickly to the forefront. A CGSOC graduate can no longer afford to simply "execute well" or just be a hard worker; those attributes are assumed. An influential graduate is expected to be a field grade leader who can engage deeply and in a disciplined, meaningful fashion to solve problems. For company grade officers, their careers to date can be summarized by how they answer the question, "What do you know?" The response expected in most cases revolves around knowledge-based relevant facts and statements of black and white truths, such as "Sir, the answer is forty-seven trucks," or "Ma'am, it will take us twelve hours."

Good company grade officers understand that straightforward questions demand straightforward answers. This is largely because the problems presented to company-level officers are frequently centered on black-and-white issues. Such binary kinds of solutions are made possible because echelons above company, and even above battalion, work to shape the problem set to reduce the amount of uncertainty. This does not mean the problems at the company level are easy. Problems are problems, and they remain difficult at all levels and for all leaders. What changes at the field-grade level is the level of complexity that problems present.

Complexity brings with it ambiguity, as well as an increased rate of change and uncertainty. Complex problems are vastly harder to understand and define with the level of certainty associated with binary-type problems. As a result, the nature of complexity demands that CGSOC graduates bring more tools to the endeavor than required at the company-grade level. Graduates must be able to think their way through



problems versus fighting their way through as in the past. The ability to think through a problem means that the field grade officer must exercise a logical and repeatable process to organize facts and make reasonable assumptions. When dealing with unstructured complex problems, the ability to reasonably bound a problem set lays the ground work for critical thinking.

Bounding—or framing—a problem allows the graduate to begin to understand the conditions and environment within which the problem exists. Bounding, in effect, allows the officer to reasonably deduce what the problem is not. Once properly bounded or framed, the next step in critical thinking is to understand the facts and their relationships to other facts as well as the framework of conditions in which they relate. This becomes ever more difficult as the conditions and facts change. With the problem properly framed and an assessment of the facts complete, the officer is able to make reasonable assumptions in order to link facts, discern between correlation and causality, and understand risks. All this builds to enhance common understanding. The planning models taught at CGSOC, such as design methodology,

A .50 caliber machine gun crew explains their employment of the weapon to 173rd Airborne Brigade commander Col. Jay Bartholomew 13 March 2018 as the Brigade Support Battalion conducts base defense live-fire training in Slovenia. A primary responsibility of officer leadership is to build teams and develop subordinate leaders while solving complex problems through methodical and informed critical analysis. (Photo by Lt. Col. John Hall, U.S. Army)

the joint planning process, and the military decision-making process, are all built around the leader's ability to critically think about facts, assumptions, conditions, and risk.

Field grade officers and CGSOC graduates are expected to do much more than attempt to simplify the complex. Complex problems are, by their very nature, difficult to define and difficult to solve. The act of attempting to simplify the complex changes the very nature of the problem. An example of this is oversimplifying the way the human brain works. By doing so, one may conclude that the human brain is simply a network of nerves and receptors encased within the skull. While not wrong, this oversimplification is not helpful because it has failed to account for the sophistication of the brain in both its

structure and processes. The result is that the nature of the human brain is lost to any meaningful conversation. Any attempt at successful brain surgery based on this oversimplified assessment would be impossible.

The oversimplification error is worse on higher-level staffs (division and corps) working on complex problems under stress because it wastes time for the staff and commanders; in turn, this compounds the stress and strain on the problem solvers. The challenge in such situations for the CGSOC graduate serving as a staff officer is to make the complex clear. This value-added ability is hard and requires a focused effort within the time available.

In addition to making the complex clear, there is also an imperative to ensure that clarity is not sacrificed for accuracy. To quote Blaise Pascal, "I have made this [letter] longer than usual, only because I have not had the time to make it shorter."² Making the complex clear is directly indicative of good critical-thinking skills as well as good communications skills. The ability to critically reason is learned and improved through disciplined repetition. Critical-thinking skills are also scalable and repeatable, which should create transparency that increases trust and confidence in the officer's judgment. As a result of solid critical-thinking skills, an officer's stock goes up and with it so too does his or her ability to make changes and exert influence in the organization.

A final word about critical-thinking skills; the ability to understand and recognize bias cannot be understated. This bias could be cognitive, contextual, or organizational. A CGSOC graduate is expected to be able to look beyond their biases to identify and solve problems. Too often, officers hold a solution in their minds and then go in search of a problem on which to impose their view of what should be done. This is a clumsy and brutish way of planning that in the end reflects a very narrow skill set in the officer. Good critical thinking keeps the problem at the center of the dilemma to be solved. Presenting clear solutions to complex problems that represent disciplined critical thinking is a major component of creating influence in organizations. The CGSOC curriculum is designed to test and develop the critical thinking of students by providing repetitions in numerous problem-solving frameworks such as the joint planning process, design methodology, and the military decision-making process. Throughout the year, students will be challenged

in their ability to apply solid, repeatable thinking. The next step in the equation is context.

On Context

Context is the ability to understand relationships and conditions within which the graduate operates and problems are solved. Closely linked to emotional intelligence, context allows the graduate the ability to nudge toward solutions versus forcing answers. As CGSOC graduates take on more complex problems within larger and more complicated organizations, they can no longer charge headlong into solving problems at the expense of their organization. Field grade officers must understand group dynamics and the context of their commander. Additionally, CGSOC graduates are expected to understand organizational context, the context of the problems at hand, and the context of time available for creating solutions.

CGSOC graduates must also understand that at the more senior levels (such as the division and corps level), the boss is not obligated to create "buy-in" with his or her subordinates. Being a field grade leader means quickly gaining an understanding of the boss's vision and intent and making it one's own. Influential and powerful field grade leaders allow the commander to extend his or her reach and influence both within in and outside the organization because the leaders "buy-in" on their own. Having an understanding of context means the CGSOC graduate is working to solve his or her boss's problems first and foremost. Influential and powerful officers work to understand the boss's perspective and not only solve those problems but also design their delivery of solution sets in this same space.

Context, at its core, is understanding what is important to the boss and what his or her priorities are. When operating within context, field grade officers present relevant, clear, and timely solutions to the commander well before decisions are made. In effect, influential and powerful staffs are able to see and then shape the conditions that not only avert a crisis but also create an intellectual environment for the commander to articulate his or her vision and communicate intent. Operating at this level, effective staff officers can bring synergistic clarity to the commander's vision.

Finally, context will change based on the command climate. Context is actually an ever-evolving process



every CGSOC graduate must understand in order to learn how his or her boss takes in information and makes decisions. This will change based on the boss and command climate. Influential field grade officers will not be prisoners to former conditions, past methods, or former commanders but will continue to add to their tool kit of understanding and designing. They will keep the boss at the center of the problem and adapt to each one in order to be effective staff officers.

A comment is in order about the difference between content and packaging—or presenting—information. It is only the unsophisticated officer that seeks one over the other. The larger the organization, the more packaging and presentation matters. This is because in larger organizations there are limited opportunities to present information to decision-makers; a simple redo may result in the staff having to wait an extended period before it can reengage with the commander. At worst, a good solution poorly packaged can easily drive a bad decision by the commander.

Finally, a great solution that is not communicated effectively and fully understood is worthless. This is at the crux of the tension between the content and the packaging; one cannot have one without the other. CGSOC offers students the opportunity to understand

A combined staff conducts planning on a NATO scenario 1 March 2017 during Exercise Eagle Owl at the Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The two-week exercise, conducted twice annually, helps officers understand cultural and procedural similarities and differences, enhance their communications skills, build professional relationships, and work toward finding team resolutions to complex tactical- and operational-level problems. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

context by studying historical case studies of both leadership and campaigns. Using this education, graduates have a baseline to continue their personal development and a set of experiences to reach back to when solving their future problems.

On Poise

For the CGSOC graduate, poise is the combat multiplier across the equation. Poise is the ability to inspire confidence in others. Poise creates trust from subordinates and superiors alike. There is a recognition among the good leaders that bad things happen to good units. What separates successful unit leaders from unsuccessful ones is what happens next; this is poise. How does the leader facing a fatal accident, a death, or any other horrible event react? The good ones display the poise

necessary to rise above the emotion while remaining grounded and connected. Poise is vital to influence, because it reflects an inner calm that shows the graduate is remaining level-headed, cool, and deliberate in the face of the worst. CGSOC attempts to train and validate this characteristic through comprehensive oral exams and numerous other opportunities to present or defend ideas in public. The students who do this best are the ones who present with confidence. CGSOC is designed as a laboratory for officers to study how they bring poise on the personal level and to the staff.

Poise starts with how the officer carries himself or herself and continues with mannerisms, clarity, and tone. Poise concludes with how the officer ends the engagement. While standing up to speak in public can be a significant emotional event for some, concluding and getting off the stage is often even harder to do. This is because amateurs brief for feedback, not content. Briefing for feedback means the presenter continues along the script at the prompting of or affirmation from the audience (or boss). When the commander fails to affirm the amateur with praise, the briefer often feels compelled to rebrief parts or even the whole endeavor. Usually, this results in a generally unsatisfactory briefing because the officer unweaves his or her own work in front of the boss in an effort to gain affirmation. Briefing for affirmation is an indication of professional immaturity, because it indicates the briefer is insecure or needs his or her ego praised as a sign of value to the commander. CGSOC works to give repetitions at this by the critical and constructive feedback from the instructors who help students get better regardless of their starting point.

If there is a single characteristic that should mark the influential CGSOC graduate, it is the ability to separate his or her ego from the work. Graduates understand the equation of influence, work to solve the commander's problems, and are able to work relentlessly without ego. They are able to create value without it personally reflecting on them in the outcome. The CGSOC graduate must be content to spend all night working on a problem only to have the boss go in a different direction the next morning because of changing conditions. The aspiration is that the CGSOC graduate will not waste time defending his or her work and not be married to the course of action due to a sunk-cost bias. The CGSOC graduate will work from a position of humility to regain the commander's vision and start

again without praise or encouragement, ever focused on the problem and the commander's intent.

Powerful officers are humble; they don't work for feedback. They possess the emotional intelligence to be able to pick up on indicators from the boss or the situation. This frees the truly powerful and influential to simply solve problems. Field grade officers who lack this skill often have to look for work while the reward of an influential graduate is more work with greater scope and responsibility. The course load at CGSOC is designed to help students better understand how to translate the concept of economically managing time—focusing on doing only that which is necessary—to their work. Time is never free, so to spend more of it than is required is irresponsible.

It is important to address the role of poise under pressure, or the concept of "grit." Grit is the ability to endure or even thrive under conditions of unrealistic timelines, incomplete resources, and competing priorities—an amalgam of passion and perseverance.³ Another term may be "antifragility," as defined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his book, *Antifragile*.⁴ Antifragility is defined as those things or individuals that become stronger and more resilient from rough handling.⁵ This is an easy concept to write but is a much harder one to put into practice. The truth is that at the field-grade level, antifragility becomes as much a component of success as work ethic and intelligence. The core to becoming antifragile or developing grit is selfless service and commitment because these qualities keep the officer externally focused versus internally focused.

A CGSOC graduate has chosen to be educated within his or her profession—the profession of arms. Conversely, the Army has chosen the graduate as a solid investment for the future. This mutual recognition allows the graduate the freedom to focus on solving problems, building teams, and developing leaders, secure in the knowledge that the institution values his or her contribution. On a personal level, this allows the officer to create a safe intellectual space from which he or she can proceed. The knowledge that he or she has been trained, educated, and is valued by the Army offers the officer the ability to simply work relentlessly and selflessly. In essence, CGSOC graduates have all the tools to create antifragility or grit within both themselves and their organizations. This is not an easy concept, but

once understood, it can be a most powerful component in the field grade officer's tool kit.

Conclusion

Regardless of the mode by which a student attends the CGSOC, graduates are expected to bring significant, oftentimes exponential value to their organizations. The Army needs leaders who can solve increasingly complex problems, build strong teams from diverse groups, and understand how to develop other leaders. These high-impact, influential, and powerful field grade officers must lead with competence, compassion, and the highest standards of ethical behavior. They must work tirelessly and selflessly to consistently make the Army and its culture better.

To create and sustain the cultural shift of large-scale combat operations, graduates of CGSOC must be able to create power in their organizations. This meaningful change does not happen by accident. It is the deliberately designed course outcome of the CGSOC. Graduates are expected to demonstrate precise and concise use of both English and the technical language of their trade. They should also be held accountable for applying deep critical-thinking skills that correctly frame problems and then use facts and assumptions to create understanding in a repeatable manner that is doctrinally sound.

Graduates must be able to show context for the larger problem set and, as a result, should be working to solve their boss's problems while achieving the boss's vision. Finally, graduates must be expected to display unshakable poise in all that they do. They should inspire those around them and bring out the best in others.

These are the components of power that graduates of CGSOC are expected to bring to their organizations. Such humble, selfless influence will allow graduates to bring exponential value to their units. In creating a military that is designed, trained, and practiced to conduct large-scale combat operations against an existential threat, the Army must produce CGSOC graduates who "get it."

The complexity and sheer difficulty of bringing influence on division and corps staffs demand competence from CGSOC graduates like never before. It is not possible to "test out of" the skills and attributes of fighting on a large scale. The demand for field grade officers who can run divisions and corps is great. Graduates of CGSOC must fulfill this need for the nation. According to a sign at the U.S. Army's School of Advanced Military Studies, when Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen was asked what should be expected of a general staff officer, he replied, "Work relentlessly, accomplish much, remain in the background, and always be more than you appear."⁶ ■

Notes

Epigraph. Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1 August 2012), para. 12.

1. Michael Lundy, "Command and General Staff Officer School Purpose" (unpublished slides, Command and General Staff Officer Course Development Review, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 15 August 2018).

2. *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, comp. Susan Ratcliffe (London: Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. "Blaise Pascal."

3. Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (New York: Scribner, 2016), 56.

4. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile, Things that Gain from Disorder* (New York: Random House, 2012).

5. *Ibid.*

6. Martin van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 147.