



The Officership Model

Exporting Leader Development to the Force

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LEADER DEVELOPMENT IS in need of a jumpstart. The Center for Army Leadership's most recent study suggests a need to address an area of seemingly waning importance to many units. The study found that Army leaders who believe their organization places a high priority on developing subordinates reached an all-time low of 35 percent (versus 46 in 2010 and 53 in 2009).¹ In fact, the Develops Others category obtained the lowest favorability rating among Army leader core competencies from 2006 to 2011, falling well short of the accepted threshold of two-thirds favorability.²

This trend is alarming. The Army classifies itself as a profession, a categorization that requires a commitment to continuing education and lifelong learning. Regaining a focus on professional development requires a renewed commitment to effective leader development training, perhaps unintentionally forsaken because of the hectic operational tempo of the last 11 years.

While one model is hardly a panacea for the Army's current mentorship challenges, the U.S. Military Academy's (USMA) capstone course, *Officership*, offers one possible solution to help rekindle the enthusiasm for leader development across the Army.

Expertise through Human Development

In *The Soldier and the State*, Samuel Huntington describes the Army profession as being unique. Not a standard occupation, it requires adherence to a self-policing ethic, or *corporateness*; it entails a *responsibility* to serve the American people as its client, and the Army requires *expertise* in its professional ability to "manage violence."³ Similarly, the Army's 2010 white paper *The Profession of Arms* emphasizes the need for professionals to "produce uniquely expert work" and stresses "intrinsic factors like the life-long pursuit of expert knowledge."⁴ The application of unique expert knowledge allows the profession to gain and maintain legitimacy with its client.

Expert knowledge, of course, cannot exist in a vacuum. In fact, the profession embraces a life-long pursuit of knowledge through three primary

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PHOTO: A platoon leaves the combat outpost on a mission during Cadet Leadership Development Training, an annual summer training event for U.S. Military Academy junior and senior cadets, West Point, New York, 26 May 2011 (West Point Public Affairs)

means: self-development, operational assignments, and institutional training.⁵

Self-development places responsibility for professional growth on the individual and includes professional reading, research, and self-assessment.

Operational assignments encompass on-the-job training and experiences gained through duties and positions.

Institutional training includes the Army's professional military education program and schools.

Put another way, "We learn through self-study, from our own experiences, and from others' experiences."⁶

Beyond the Army's formal professional military education program, institutional training should include an effective leadership development training plan, tailored to the battalion and company levels. This implies, of course, that leaders in units must prioritize time to do some amount of teaching of subordinates. Precisely this pedagogical component—what Don Snider calls the "human development" cluster of the profession's expert knowledge—is what has been lacking recently in our force.⁷ Yet, never before has learning from others been more critical to the continuing professionalization of the Army, particularly with the wealth of knowledge acquired from having fought two wars simultaneously in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Interestingly, the data suggest that we recognize the benefits of leader development in preparing ourselves for positions of greater responsibility. Consider that leaders have consistently rated highly the effectiveness of the operational experience and self-development domains; they now rest at 80 and 78 percent, respectively. While the institutional training domain rates significantly lower at 65 percent, one may still safely conclude that leader development has perceived benefits for the force. If these benefits are real and result in a stronger Army, leaders should strive to prioritize it. Yet, only 35 percent of those surveyed actually believe their unit affords them the time to develop themselves.⁸

This concerning disparity between a "will" and a "way" is further reinforced in the operational experience domain, where leaders have consistently pointed to work experience as an important factor in preparing them for positions of increased responsibility. Field grade officers and senior NCOs, for example, currently value such experience at 90 and

88 percent, respectively. When evaluating their own role in the process, field grade officers (67 percent) largely believe they have sufficient time to develop subordinates, while junior officers (32 percent) do not. When it comes to engaging in certain on-the-job developmental activities, however, 46 percent of leaders say they rarely or occasionally have opportunities to learn from superiors; 52 percent say they rarely or occasionally engage in formal leader development programs; and 55 percent say they rarely or occasionally receive developmental counseling from immediate superiors.⁹

Where is the breakdown? It seems that although our leaders have the desire to grow professionally through self-study, and they clearly value the importance of learning from operational experiences, there is an insufficient leader development program in place at the unit level to capitalize on the motivation for professional growth and to convert what has been learned through experiences into development opportunities. A lack of a program also seems to belie a lack of emphasis on its importance. With the desire to develop readily apparent, Army leaders must restore the capacity for effective professional development programs and prioritize their implementation in unit training plans.

A Model for Leader Development Training

After witnessing the benign neglect of leader development over the last decade, where can Army leaders turn to reinvest in professional development? Where can they find ideas that will breathe life into their leader development training programs? One model originates at West Point's Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic, which directs the senior cadets' capstone course, *MX400 Officership*.

Founded in response to a recommendation of General (retired) Frederick Franks, Jr., the seminar course bridges the gap between being a cadet and being an officer. Franks had identified a "need in the cadet curriculum for a common, culminating, integrating, and transformational experience, designed to tie the various strands of officership instruction together at the end of the cadet career."¹⁰

The course evolved from an elective examining the ethos and behavioral considerations of the profession to a capstone class applying case studies to practical situations in an effort to discover enduring

truths of leadership. According to West Point's superintendent, Lieutenant General David Huntoon, "MX400 was developed to transcend the total cadet experience—military, academic, and physical, tying its various components together, forging leaders of character as cadets complete their final preparation to enter the officer ranks."¹¹

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, *Officership* encourages a teaching environment that closely resembles a focused leader development program. It polishes cadets' self-concept of officer identities, including what it means to be a leader of character, a warrior, a member of the profession, and a servant to the nation.¹² The course consists of four blocks of instruction: Officership in Action—Mission Command, The Military Profession, Company Grade Officer, and Servant to the Nation, each of which offers a mature approach to professional growth. Converted into more flexible modules, the *Officership* curriculum has real applicability and transferability to professional development training programs in the force.



U.S. Military Academy cadets react to hostile villagers in an urban operations scenario during Cadet Leadership Development Training, West Point, New York, 9 June 2011.
(West Point Public Affairs, Mike Strasser)

Officership in Action—Mission Command

The first block, entitled Officership in Action—Mission Command, introduces mission command, defined as “the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of full spectrum operations.”¹³ Class mentors may explain the recent doctrinal change from the *battle command* phrase, a subtle but important distinction placing emphasis on junior leader empowerment and discretion in making command decisions.

Just as it is important for cadets to understand the premium placed on disciplined initiative consistent with commander’s intent at the small-unit level, a discussion of mission command is also useful for officers in the Army writ large. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dempsey, argues—

With our shift to mission command, we must take a careful look at how we adapt our leader-development programs and policies to develop leaders who can effectively operate in a much more transparent, complex, and decentralized operational environment. Aligning and connecting our leader-development programs and policies with our conceptual foundation and doctrinal changes such as mission command become the most critical adaptations we can make within our campaign of learning.¹⁴

The *Officership* course is one attempt to address this issue upfront with cadets, prior to commissioning, and the Mission Command block fosters this professional development with old-fashioned war storytelling. Experienced junior and field grade officers share their combat experiences with the cadets in both small and large group settings, where facilitators also contribute to the experience by pausing a story at the moment of decision, forcing cadets to examine and discuss what they would do under similar circumstances, and drawing conclusions about proper conduct in the process. This leader development methodology is transferrable to the force.

With so many soldiers knowing how to fight today, experienced leaders in the Army must share their stories with their units as a means to self-improvement and discovery. While combat-tested leaders may initially be reluctant to share personal stories with their subordinates, particularly if they reveal vulnerability, Franks encourages leaders to resist the “unspoken stricture against telling war stories.”¹⁵ They may offer much to inexperienced and experienced subordinates alike. The experienced storytellers may achieve a cathartic effect if they are struggling with post-traumatic stress.¹⁶ For the listener, Franks sees clear value in the knowledge that they can share, and he argues that the “commander who shares his experiences, good and bad, encourages a climate of open exchange and honest appraisal. These stories are valuable. They stimulate, they enrich, they teach.”¹⁷ Furthermore, his suggested method for discussing stories through the lenses of *character*, *competence*, and *leadership* offers a useful framework for professional discourse in combat-proven formations across the Army.

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Some may be skeptical about the value of war stories as a means to leader development. Tim O’Brien, author of *The Things They Carried*, an award-winning collection of stories detailing the experiences of a U.S. Army infantry platoon in Vietnam, urges caution about the unreliability of war stories in his novel. In the chapter “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien presents the paradox inherent in war stories:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it is difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Lemon, you

look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed.¹⁸

Elizabeth Samet, an English professor at USMA and author of *Soldier’s Heart: Reading Literature through Peace and War at West Point*, shares this concern and believes that in war stories, there may be a danger in surrendering too much to authenticity. In other words, officers—particularly those with little to no combat experience—may yield too much to the authority of their storyteller, potentially of higher rank, presenting only one point of view.¹⁹ Here, the instructive value may be in jeopardy when everything is accepted as fact or as “best practice.”

To hedge against this problem, Samet suggests “triangulation” in storytelling. Three participants share their version of the same event, or one narrator shares her story through three mediums (i.e., sharing a journal entry, a letter home, and verbal narrative leaning on memory) in order to present a clearer picture. For Army leaders to avoid a “bottom-line-up-front” mentality is also important. They should avoid the insistence on resolution and emphasize open-endedness in discussing these stories.²⁰ By focusing on the good, bad, and ugly, as Franks suggests, and by making an effort to triangulate for accuracy, as Samet recommends, small unit leaders can preserve narrative value and convert combat experiences into valuable learning opportunities.

As units capitalize on the stories warfighters bring to their leader development programs, they might also consider complementing others’ experiences with scheduled leader self-study sessions and weaving the mission command theme through their leader development training plan. For example, *Officership* encourages cadets to begin their professional reading journey with David Hackett Fischer’s Pulitzer-Prize winning book, *Washington’s Crossing*. Focusing on Washington’s command during the pivotal Battle of Trenton, cadets learn the enduring human truths of mission command and compare leadership lessons with the Combat Studies Institute’s detailed account of *Wanat: Combat Action in Afghanistan*, 2008.

At Trenton, Washington showed tremendous perseverance despite a seemingly impossible mission under terrible winter weather conditions. Similarly, U.S. soldiers at an austere outpost in Afghanistan overcame overwhelming odds after the enemy's tactical surprise to persevere in defending the outpost despite the relentless efforts of 150 heavily armed Taliban fighters. As such, the case studies of Wanat and Trenton are snapshots of *character*, *competence*, and *leadership* that have real application and relevance to officers. They realize what went well, what did not go well, and what they would or could have done under similar circumstances. Effective leader development programs must make every effort to draw historical parallels with modern accounts of war to reveal these enduring principles of mission-type command that can have a lasting impact on professionals.

Proper facilitation is critical to learning. Perhaps nothing is more destructive to professional exchange than a canned PowerPoint presentation, which “stifles discussion, critical thinking, and thoughtful decision-making.”²¹ Instead, *Officership* proposes a system in line with “the need to move away from a platform-centric learning model to one that is centered more on learning through facilitation and collaboration.”²² Army organizations can successfully build expertise by combining self-study, storytelling, and learning from others.²³ They can do so through experiential learning, practice at solving real-world problems, reflection on lasting impressions that are useful, and through using the Mission Command block for a revamped leadership development program. Not only do these lead to the lifelong learning incumbent upon professionals, but they also capture lessons learned over a decade of war.

The Military Profession

The second block of *Officership*—and another module idea for leader development training—is The Military Profession. With the Army Profession Campaign in 2011 came a call to “take a hard look at ourselves to ensure we understand what we have been through over the past nine years, how we have changed, and how we must adapt to succeed in an era of persistent conflict.”²⁴ Assuming that the United States will frequently continue to use the military as the preferred instrument of power for the foreseeable future, a successful leader development model



SFC Class Kyle Silvernale yells commands to his troops during air assault training in Alaska's Chugach Mountain Range, 12 May 2011. (U.S. Air Force, SrA Christopher Gross)

must focus on grooming professionals to be high-performance warfighters. The army should not lose sight of what war ultimately demands, even amidst calls for a return to the soldierly standards of a so-called “garrison Army.”

However, without also defining what the profession is, not just what it demands, self-examination is difficult. An effective leader development program should endeavor to frame this discussion. How is the profession different from a bureaucratic agency, or even a professional baseball team? Just what is the Army's jurisdiction as it moves from what Huntington called the “management of violence” to what political sociologist James Burk called “the broad jurisdiction of the management of peace?”²⁵ How do officers serve as moral exemplars for their soldiers, in times of relative peace but particularly while in combat? *Officership* seeks to address these questions and others with cadets in a seminar-style forum that encourages analysis and debate—questions that are clearly relevant to a military profession seeking to redefine itself while adapting to meet strategic challenges.

Returning to the idea that professions require a certain expertise and a commitment to lifelong learning, units can better frame a healthy examination of the profession in their leader development programs with a mentoring approach involving four clusters

of expert knowledge, which the *Officership* course examines in depth: military-technical expertise, moral-ethical development, political-cultural understanding, and human development abilities. Focusing on the clusters in the force will allow units to grow and develop in these areas, ultimately improving the profession as a whole:

- The military-technical field helps leaders understand that building a unique skill set is, namely, the ability to employ lethal and nonlethal force in support of defending the nation's interests, is paramount. This requires a commitment to lifelong learning.

- Moral-ethical considerations demand right action. Professionals must understand the moral dimension of fighting a war. Ethical considerations shape the professional discourse by placing emphasis on the Army Values. These values include loyalty (beginning with the Constitution and ending with one's soldiers), duty (a moral obligation), respect (to subordinates, superiors, civilians, and the enemy alike), selfless service (the nation's needs over one's own), honor (living one's core values), integrity (doing what is right when no one is watching), and personal courage (moral and physical). Forming the acronym "LDRSHIP," the Army Values must be more than a pious slogan of vaguely defined virtues. These values have to guide soldierly action and direct leaders' decision making in combat and at home station.

- Political-cultural expertise is necessary in developing officers who understand the human dimension of the battlefield, even in a data-driven world. They must realize a commitment to understanding the environments in which they operate. Only by doing so can they serve their clients, the American people, correctly.

- The human-development cluster of expertise acknowledges the necessity of investing in the personal improvement of our leaders and soldiers.²⁶

Company Grade Officer

Not surprisingly, *Officership's* third block of instruction, the Company Grade Officer, has widespread appeal to West Point senior class cadets enrolled in the capstone course. While the Military Profession block may be more theoretical in nature, the Company Grade Officer block is more concrete and practical. Each lesson brings another opportunity for officer development by pooling

and consolidating readily available, contemporary combat stories from the company commanders' online forum. This forum allows junior Army leaders to network, share ideas and best practices, and post questions and responses to leadership challenges they may be facing. The module is relevant not only to soon-to-be officers but also to officers refining their unit leader development programs and incorporating the mission command theme.

One class exercise, a tactical decision game, involves a computer recreation of battles in either Iraq or Afghanistan, during which cadets evaluate the friendly and enemy situations, consider the terrain, time available, and civil considerations, and draft mission and concept paragraphs directing their subordinate units, as they would if they were in the leader's position. For example, the Army Training Network offers an excellent video on the Wanat battle that is useful in presenting cadets with a scenario to which they must react, as if they were the acting platoon leader on the ground or quick reaction force leader. This experiential exercise forces leaders to consider their actions in place of the soldiers they study.

Another lesson on Understanding Your Unit covers methods that leaders can use to enhance their awareness of their units' strengths and weaknesses—whether through command climate surveys, sensing sessions, focus group feedback, or simply talking with soldiers in the motor pool. This instruction may seem elementary to some, but it deserves renewed attention with an Army attempting to better know itself. It also serves as an effective launch pad for the Incentives and Disincentives lesson, which examines methods for best motivating soldiers and subordinate leaders. Motivating soldiers after first taking some time to understand them is easier.

Counseling in the *Officership* curriculum is an important component. Effective counseling deserves consistent attention in regular Army units striving for healthy command climates. The Officer and Non-Commissioned Officer Relationship class gives cadets a chance to counsel platoon sergeants (role-played by former platoon sergeants assigned to West Point), an experience that many of them are anxiously anticipating as they approach their commissioning.²⁷ Given the abysmal survey results on the question of counseling, it appears that future lieutenants are not the only ones who could benefit from a training session on proper leader-subordinate

counseling. Counseling—setting expectations for subordinates and keeping them posted on their progress—deserves attention across the Army at large.

Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of the Company Grade Officer module is the opportunity to integrate Army-oriented social media sites maintained by West Point's Center for Company-level Leaders. This center is the home of the *companycommand.com* and *platoonleader.com* professional online forums, both of which allow junior leaders across the force to network and share leadership ideas through *MilSpace*, a site accessible to all Army officers and similar in style and format to *Facebook*.

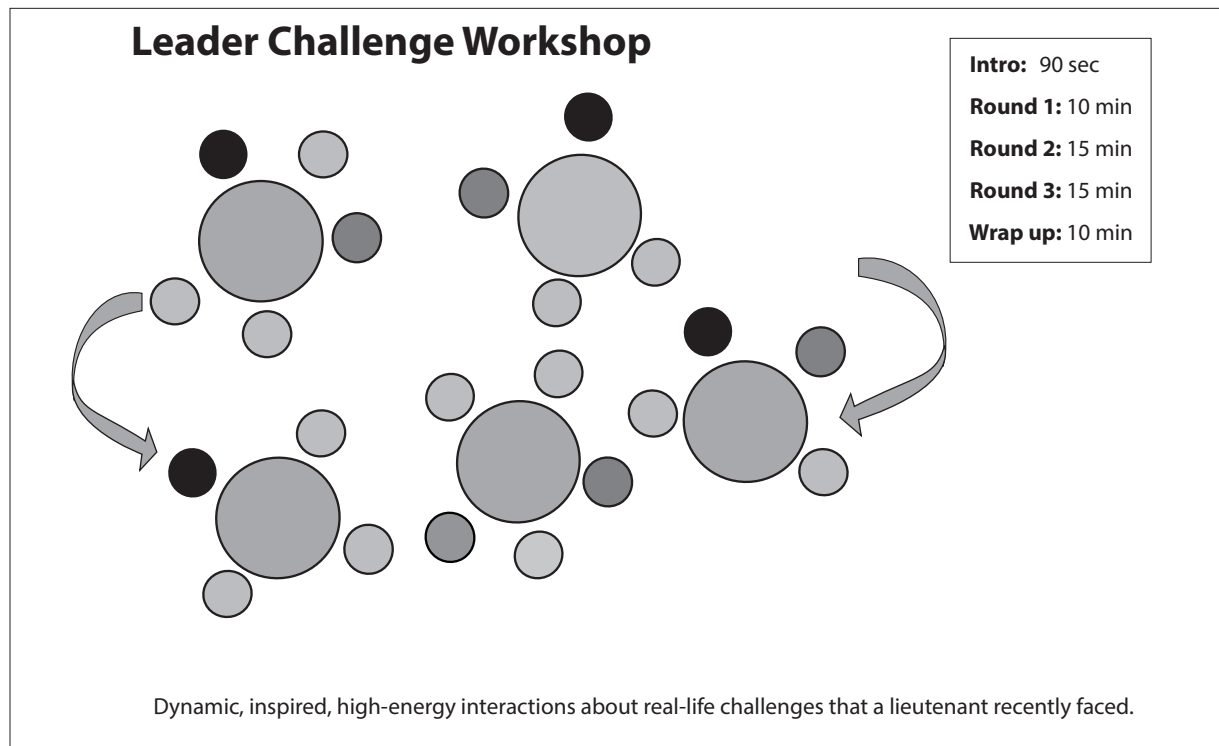
The Leader Challenge inculcates the idea that "leader development programs should be responsive to the environment, including such factors as law, policy, resources, force structure, world situation, *technology* [italics added], and professional development."²⁸ For future lieutenants and current platoon leaders, *platoonleader.com* has a host of Leader Challenge videos, which present difficult decision-making scenarios and solicit short written responses by the viewer in a technological approach that will be familiar to this generation. The scenarios include platoon leader-platoon sergeant relationships, security force

partnership problems, combat integrity and leadership issues, and difficult rules of engagement situations. Conveniently, most of the *Officership* lessons have a Leader Challenge that coincides with their themes or learning objectives.

The Leader Challenge requires officers to view a short war story—told by a recent junior officer Iraq or Afghanistan veteran—and type a 500-character response at the decision point. After completing their response, they can complete the video and see the responses of other leaders in the *MilSpace* community. A highly effective tool for sparking dialogue and debate, the Leader Challenge clips allow a facilitator to filter and consolidate responses of the members he or she values.

For example, a small-group instructor can isolate the responses of his class from the larger *MilSpace* community, just as a battalion commander could isolate the responses of subordinate lieutenants and captains. This ability lends a very personal feel to the site and is a tremendous resource for sparking discussion on important tactical, moral, and professional questions.

The Leader Challenge Workshop format (see figure below) brings online responses to the small group





CPT Nick Franck, assigned to the 12th Combat Aviation Brigade, navigates to a point during the night-to-day land navigation course as a part of the U.S. Army Europe Best Junior Officer Competition in Grafenwoehr, Germany, 16 November 2011.

and forces young leaders to evaluate their responses in a more personal setting.²⁹ More senior leaders in the unit can serve as facilitators for groups of three younger leaders, circulating from table to table to receive as much feedback and as many perspectives as possible for any given challenge. Feedback from more senior officers, as well as peers, in the organization provides for a unity of command and allows young, inexperienced leaders to calibrate their decision-making in a productive, nonthreatening manner.

Servant to the Nation

Until now, most of the content of the *Officership* modules has focused on cadet and junior officer development. The last block of instruction, Servant to the Nation, can help units better incorporate field grade officer professional growth. With its emphasis on lifelong service, this *Officership* module stresses the importance of officer development, understanding and adhering to proper civil-military and military-media relations, and hearing from senior leaders who can impart lessons learned from their perspectives at higher echelons of command.

This module, too, is transferable to unit leader development programs in the force. For example, a battalion commander could consider hosting a senior

leader (brigade commander or above) on subjects ranging from field grade officer development to professional considerations for taking command at the next echelon. The goal is continuous learning: if previous lessons seem too basic, units can take it to the next level and focus on developing leaders as they transition to positions of increased responsibility.³⁰

The officer development lesson presents an opportunity to highlight the administrative areas of leadership neglected because of the military's prolonged focus on combat—for instance, property and supply accountability, training management, maintenance, physical readiness training, effective writing of awards and evaluation reports, or wherever unit leadership sees weakness.

Lessons in civil-military and military-media relations seem especially relevant to units' more senior leaders in light of recent civil-military miscalculations. In the aftermath of General Stanley McChrystal's relief by President Obama, scholar Marybeth Ulrich concluded that “[professional military education] institutions should seize and create opportunities to promulgate a set of civil-military relations norms that will promote effective civil-military interactions, promote trust and respect, and contribute to effective policy and strategy.”³¹ Ulrich's prescription for a skill

set (eroded because of the strain of a decade of war) should extend beyond the schoolhouse and become a regular fixture in units' leader development training programs.

With the military's obligation "to do no harm to the democratic institutions and the democratic policy-making processes of our government," continued leader grooming in the social-political area of expert knowledge must set proper expectations and standards for interacting with media and the nation's elected officials.³² The last decade of war has revealed the strategic impact that both platoon leaders and division commanders can have in a media-rich environment. A module on selflessness at the field grade level and beyond reinforces the concept that mission command is a burden of responsibility for all echelons of leaders.

Already at an AKO Hub near You

The *Officership* model, while not a complete cure for what ails the profession, may generate ideas to help improve leader development programs at the battalion and company levels and even in other Army commissioning sources. At best, it offers concrete lesson plans, which are already available to the Army Knowledge Online community.³³ The lesson plans provide learning objectives and recommended readings flexible enough to adapt to training objectives.

While the *Officership* model is flexible, the depth of expertise required to serve is not. It demands continual self-improvement and a commitment to developing others. We can extrapolate the enduring truths of leadership to serve as a model for development even as the nation explores reducing the military. The Army's mission must be to prepare for conflict.

With the wealth of experienced soldiers, just sharing a particularly meaningful combat story can achieve the desired effect of developing others by forcing them to evaluate how they would respond under similar circumstances. This is simple to accomplish, is not extravagant or costly, and yet it drives a large component of the *Officership* program.

Telling stories alone will not solve the Army's leader development problem, but leader development as a priority on a battalion's long-range training calendar will. What the program *does* call for—and is nonnegotiable—is the prioritizing of leader development across the Army. In this sense, the means are less important than the ends. Only by commanders personally investing time to plan and implement leader development training will the Army be able to harvest and codify the tremendous insights developed over the last more than a decade of war. **MR**

NOTES

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