



Command Sgt. Maj. Wesley Weygandt, commandant of U.S. Army Alaska's Sgt. First Class Christopher R. Brevard Noncommissioned Officer Academy, welcomes Warrior Leader Course class 03-10 during the commandant's inbrief 2 December 2009 at Fort Wainwright's Battle Command Training Center.

(Photo by Sheryl Nix, Fort Wainwright PAO)

The Pen and the Sword

The New Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System—NCO 2020

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After 12 years of war, a debate is emerging over the ability of the Army's noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps to adapt to the changing operational environment (OE). The future will require adept NCOs armed with increased knowledge and new skills. Developing this NCO of the future can only occur by transforming how the Army educates NCOs today.

This article will briefly discuss the projected OE and identify the cognitive abilities needed to equip the NCO corps for 2020 and beyond. The case to revise the Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES) is analyzed using an educational model, against current Army concepts, frameworks, and strategies. The analysis shows a clear need for improved education and development processes and a transformation to the new NCO professional development system—NCO 2020.

Preparing for the Projected Operational Environment

The big question is—How will the Army prepare NCOs to lead America's sons and daughters in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments?¹ The fiscal constraints caused by the Nation's soaring debt and the shared responsibility of the Army to support these constraints add to the challenges of VUCA environments. The Army must meet these challenges, continue to defend the Nation, and remain the world's premier land force while becoming smaller, more flexible, and more adaptive.

Recently, Lt. Gen. Keith Walker, deputy commanding general, Futures/director, Army Capabilities Integration Center, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, painted a complex picture of the projected OE. He described it as driven by the competition for wealth, resources, political authority, influence, sovereignty, identity, and legitimacy, where unexpected opportunists will emerge from conflict in a complex environment. The complex environment is shaped by multiple actors, asymmetric threats, and chaotic conditions. It is technologically driven in an information age where adversaries have the ability to communicate and adjust their planning cycles at the speed of Twitter.²

The proliferation of technology will degrade soldiers' previous advantages over our adversaries in communication and weapons. This will place a premium on

shorter equipment life cycles as the Army investments in research and development to stay ahead of our enemies. Our land force's ability to build combat power over several months, or sometimes years, may be eroded as irrational actors learn from our success over the last two decades. The Army will need to invest wisely in its soldiers and NCOs to overcome these challenges.

The proposition in the historical adage "the pen is mightier than the sword" is not an argument for a reduction in training or tactical proficiency.³ Rather, it is an argument to increase tactical proficiency by training critical, agile, flexible, and creatively thinking NCOs who are able to operate under the Army's mission command philosophy. The Army must change its current Industrial Age developmental construct. The current system is satisfied with simply training and achieving the lower levels of cognition—knowledge, understanding, and application.⁴ The new era will require a blended-learning process that infuses rigor into the NCOES. It is essential for the new system to produce NCOs instilled with the cognitive ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate.⁵

Getting There

The Army must evolve the current NCOES into an integrated NCO professional development system—NCO 2020. To achieve this change, the NCO corps must use a deliberate, data-driven, analytical process to examine the current NCO development model. The foundation and guideposts for the new system are the *Army Leader Development Strategy*, *The U.S. Army Learning Concept 2015 (ALC 2015)*, and the Army learning model.⁶ The result must be a system capable of developing an NCO corps ready to execute missions in support of national security requirements in 2020 and beyond. While remaining consistent with the NCO corps vision, NCO 2020 must achieve the following objectives:

- ◆ Provide the Army with an adaptable, resilient NCO corps capable of training and leading soldiers in uncertain and complex joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational operating environments.
- ◆ Improve the professionalism of the NCO corps.
- ◆ Improve training and education expertise in the NCO corps in order to sustain leader development, support expansibility, and build capacity.



Soldiers attending the 7th Army's NCO Academy learn leadership skills during simulated missions at the Joint Multinational Training Command in Grafenwoehr, Germany, 10 February 2009.

(Photo by Christian Marquardt, 7th Army JMTC PAO)

- ◆ Advising leaders at platoon and higher levels
- ◆ Expertly training enlisted soldiers, crews, and small teams
- ◆ Taking care of soldiers and their families
- ◆ Enforcing standards
- ◆ Training subordinates to master their military occupational specialties

Achieving these ends is vital to winning our nation's wars across the full range of conflict. The NCO corps must leverage the three training domains to enhance future NCO competencies so they can adapt to changing tactical, operational, and strategic conditions as

- ◆ Provide challenging and rigorous leader development training, education, and experiences that result in earlier technical mastery, increased tactical skills, adaptability, innovation, and agility—in other words, mastery of the NCO general learning outcomes.⁷

- ◆ Articulate learning responsibilities and requirements across the three training domains (operational, institutional, and self-development) and integrate them into a synchronized, effective, and efficient development system.⁸

- ◆ Improve professional development models and learning curricula so that soldiers and leaders can assess leader development progress, track learning events, create goals, and certify professionals.

- ◆ Support identification and development of NCOs to serve in operational- and strategic-level assignments.

NCO 2020 will meet these objectives by accepting the challenge, learning from the past, and synthesizing the “as is” with the “can be” using an instructional systems design process. The ADDIE (analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation) process is the tool the Army will use to transform the current NCOES into the NCO 2020 system designed to support mission command and provide adaptability to the VUCA environment.⁹ The outcome will be an NCO corps that supports Army goals and objectives by doing the following:

- ◆ Leading teams, squads, and platoons
- ◆ Serving in staff roles

well as a thinking enemy. The complexity of the OE, coupled with the need to execute a full range of decentralized operations in a variety of cultures, will drive the increasing learning demand placed on NCOs.

To ensure a capabilities-based strategy, analysts reviewed the framework in *The United States Army Operating Concept*.¹⁰ The Army operating concept provides a “concept framework” for the development of capabilities for the future force in the 2016 to 2028 time-frame. The framework contains a family of six concepts that examine the projected OE and provide strategic guidance to develop the capabilities required in support of Army modernization. *The U.S. Army Capstone Concept* is the foundation for a series of documents.¹¹ The operating concept's six functional concepts align with warfighting functions and three other concepts focused on the development of soldiers, leaders, and organizations.¹² The Army operating concept describes how Army forces will conduct operations as part of the joint force to deter conflict, prevail in war, and succeed in a wide range of contingencies in the future OE. These documents guide efforts to identify and develop the requirements of the future force in which an NCO must lead.

In addition to the concepts, the *Army Leader Development Strategy* (ALDS) describes the characteristics the Army desires in leaders throughout their careers. It contains the guiding strategy to build those characteristics.¹³ Together, the concepts and ALDS

provide the theoretical guidance that will drive when, where, and how the Army develops leaders in the twenty-first century. They provide the basis to determine the way ahead for the development of Army NCOs.

A review of Army concepts, which outline the projected OE and a vision for the future force, showed analysts what to prepare our NCOs for in the year 2020 and beyond. The next challenge was determining how to prepare them. The Center for Army Leadership and the Army Innovations and Initiatives Division were instrumental in collecting data and providing trend analysis to identify the gaps in the current development of NCOs. *The 2012 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership: Main Finding Technical Report 2013-1* supplied empirical data to the Institute for Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development, identifying problems in

NCO professional certifications and gaps in current NCO professional development strategies.¹⁴ The Army Innovations and Initiatives Division's NCOES needs analysis examined ways to improve the NCOES and provided recommendations to United States Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and the Institute for Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development.

According to analysis, many aspects of the Army's training system will remain task-based. The competencies identified in the study represent broader sets of skills necessary to enable task performance within the context of complex OEs. Unlike many tasks with discrete performance standards and a definitive end to the performance, the competencies are in a broader skills construct within the Army learning model. These evolved from ALC 2015. ALC 2015 is the learning environment the Army envisions in 2015.¹⁵



U.S. Army soldiers assigned to 412th Aviation Support Battalion conduct training using the Dismounted Soldier Training System (DSTS) at the 7th Army Joint Multinational Training Command at Grafenwoehr, Germany, 11 December 2013. The DSTS is the first fully-immersive virtual simulation for infantry, and one of several virtual training systems available to U.S., partnered, and allied forces in Europe.

(Photo by Markus Rauchenberger, Training Support Center Grafenwoehr)

ALC 2015 seeks to improve our learning model by leveraging technology without sacrificing standards so we can provide credible, rigorous, and relevant training and education for our force of combat-seasoned soldiers and leaders. It argues we must establish a continuum of learning from the time soldiers are accessed until the time they retire. It also clarifies that the responsibility for developing soldiers is a shared responsibility among the institutional schoolhouse, tactical units, and the individuals themselves.

ALC 2015 concentrates on advances in technology rather than the types of technologies. In other words, the concept is capabilities-based with a focus on online gaming and mobile, or portable, learning—interfacing physical, virtual, and group collaboration to achieve learning outcomes. Although prior research and new policies outline the how and what in regard to training our NCOs, we must now concentrate on the when and where the training will take place.¹⁶

Learning policies outline high standards consistent across our formation and provide clear expectations aligned to the expectations of learning outcomes. To receive the maximum return on our investment, the Army must ensure it delivers education to the NCO in the right domain at the right times in their careers. To aid in producing well-rounded leaders, the Army can capitalize on the current generation's familiarity with computers. The Army could deliver more training to NCOs in a self-structured format. The self-structured format allows the institution to raise the quality of the instruction while decreasing the cost. The result is improvement in the NCOs' technical and tactical proficiency in a shorter amount of time. Albeit economical and timely, the Army must also be judicious about what training it delivers in this format. It must be remembered that soldiering is, above everything else, a human endeavor. Therefore, proficiency in teamwork, problem solving, negotiation skills, and leadership are best taught face-to-face with peers, facilitators, and mentors, not in virtual reality.

Anchoring on the Army's Professional Ethic and Values

As the Army moves forward, it must keep its values as a centerpiece of education. The self-actualized, critically thinking future NCOs of 2020 will need mentorship and guidance to ensure they think and

decide in a manner aligned with the values and ethic of the profession. Gen. William S. Wallace alluded to this in a 2008 TRADOC pamphlet on the human dimension, which he described as comprising “the moral, physical and cognitive components of soldier, leader, and organizational development and performance.”¹⁷ Focusing on the moral component, our future NCOs must be grounded in the ethical values that are essential elements of current officer training. Incorporating learning objectives covering the Army's professional ethic and the expected ethical behavior of leaders into all phases of curriculum is critical for NCO 2020.

A key element to being a critical thinker and a decisive enlisted leader in the future Army will be knowing what right looks like. Anchoring NCO 2020's future to the Army values and professional ethic will meet Wallace's human dimension imperative of moral development. Strong ethical leadership is the glue that leads to mission accomplishment and increases unit cohesion.

Conclusion

The Army faces a future of diminishing resources, agile adversaries, and constantly changing OEs. Rapidly evolving technology will affect perceptions and decisions at an increasing rate and level of complexity. The Army's NCO corps must be up to the challenge of the geopolitical world envisioned in 2020. Leaders must be instilled with the ability to effectively consider the complexities, think effectively, and adapt beyond preconceived conclusions. To develop NCOs to this higher level of cognition, the Army must transform its current NCOES to a newly revised NCO professional development system: NCO 2020.

This article provides the ends and ways to revise the NCOES in accordance with the concepts, frameworks, and strategies already embraced by the Army. Those results will inform the means or Army education and training resources required to provide the rigorous experience these flexible and adaptive NCO leaders require. Innovative technologies and improved education processes can also assist in the delivery of new age development. If the Army believes an adept thinker builds a mightier warrior, then it is time to transform. Developing NCO 2020 will prepare our NCOs for the challenges of future battlefields. ■

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Notes

1. John S. Richard, *The Learning Army: Approaching the 21st Century as a Learning Organization* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 22 May 1997), 8.
2. Keith Walker, 2013, panel discussion during the 2013 Annual AUSA [Association of the U.S. Army] Convention (Washington, DC, 2013).
3. Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Not So Bad As We Seem; or, Many Sides to a Character* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1851).
4. Benjamin S. Bloom, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1956).
5. Ibid.
6. U.S. Army, *Army Leader Development Strategy (ALDS) 2013*, <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/CAL/repository/ALDS-5June%202013Record.pdf>; and, Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet (TP) 525-8-2, *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 2011).
7. ALC 2015 provides a set of nine overarching 21st Century Competencies "that are essential to ensure soldiers and leaders are fully prepared to prevail in complex, uncertain environments." Each competency has associated general learning outcomes (GLOs) that are specific to officers, warrant officers, NCOs, and Army civilians. The NCO GLOs were developed by the Institute for Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development.
8. TP 525-8-3, *The U.S. Army Training Concept, 2012-2020* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2011), 12.
9. W. Clayton Allen, "Overview and Evolution of the ADDIE Training System," *Advances in Developing Human Resources 8* (November 2006): 430-441.
10. TP 525-3-1, *The United States Army Operating Concept, 2016-2018* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2010), 5.
11. TP 525-3-0, *The U.S. Army Capstone Concept* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2012).
12. TP 525-3-1, App. B.
13. ALDS 2013.
14. Leadership Research, Assessment, and Doctrine Division, The Center for Army Leadership, *The 2012 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership: Main Finding Technical Report 2013-1*, 2013, <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/CAL/repository/2012CASALMainFindingsTechnicalReport2013-1.pdf>.
15. TP 525-8-2.
16. TP 525-8-3.
17. Originally published in 2008, see TP 525-3-7, *The U.S. Army Human Dimension Concept* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2014).