Drink, Think, Link

Guiding Online Mentorship

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Nick and I read Steve Leonard's article "Scotch and Cigars: In Search of the Elusive Military Mentor" just a couple months after we launched NSTR.[1] Doctrine Man's alter ego decried the loss of mentorship and reverse mentorship that the beer calls of his lieutenant years had fostered. The officer clubs had died, and with them, the Army had lost one of the most effective mentorship tools it ever had. While the Army has an entire field manual (FM) dedicated to developing leaders, you won't find the words "beer," "scotch," or "cigar" in it.[2] Ashes to ashes.

In the absence of formal clubs, informal mentorship groups have sprung up all over. Typically coined "drink and think," or "scotch and cigars," these "thinking beer calls" are about more than just officer club culture.[3] As Nate Finney writes, "These gatherings [are] about meeting new people, forging stronger bonds, and leveraging a strong network by growing the diversity of the group … a way to experience 'discovery activities.'"[4] Finney continues,

> This is the "New Model" Mentoring. We are no longer constrained to mentorship by our chain of command or bosses. Instead, we get our development, support, and direction from peers and seniors in informal settings, across careers and experiences.[5]

Good units have formal professional development programs. Great units have both formal and informal mentorship activities. You might see a unit staff ride or case study on Operation Causeway, and you should. But you're less likely to see formal professional development instruction on how to write an email or an officer evaluation report (OER); the former is what you'll write most in the Army, but *the latter is the most impactful*. In twenty years of service, the Army never gave either of us a class on how to write an OER. It was mentors along the way who taught us, mentors who spent hours late at night in Iraq and Afghanistan typing on mIRC (internet relay chat) to help us navigate trying times. However, not everyone is so lucky.

Informal professional development events allow for the passage of tacit knowledge; lessons you learn when you are young that you still remember when you are old. The things that don't get written down in an FM but are critical to your success as a soldier. Mentors are those who try to share their tacit knowledge so you don't have to learn the hard way how to pack a ruck or that trees aren't cover. Mentors help you navigate staff politics and clue you in to broadening opportunities you didn't know existed. Good mentorship is a debt you incur that you can only pay forward. We owe our profession and our fellow soldiers to both seek out and contribute our own mentorship.

So, You've Heard the Call, Now What?

Monthly informal gatherings can be found just outside the Naval War College, in downtown Washington, D.C., and in the closest pub to any graduate school with veteran students. However, these venues are constrained by distance and by time. Watering hole mentorship started shifting to online over twenty-five years ago when John Collins's Warlord Loop launched in 1998, an inspiration for our own efforts.[6]

Just like in Steve Leonard's "Beer Calls," "The key was to provide an environment that fostered a stress-free exchange of ideas and professional and personal counsel."[7] Collins wanted the same, and when senior national security officials stonewalled him, he built it himself. "His vision was a discussion group in which the national security thinkers could debate ideas without being bound by the typical bureaucratic restrictions, such as seniority, budgets and the built-in biases of the various military services."[8]

Online forums also enable more people to engage, particularly in a disaggregated fashion. When a third of your members move every year, digital communication becomes the default. Thankfully, online forums take very little work and no money to start. Of the two most active online professional military communities, one was started by a captain, the other by a staff sergeant.

NSTR grew out of a backchannel Facebook chat used by a small group of midgrade officers to share articles, ideas, and memes. Over the years, the community expanded as core

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members recruited from an ever-widening geography and background. Since its inception in 2018, NSTR has grown to include a diverse group of service members, academics, writers, and tech nerds, with membership hovering between 125 and 175. You'll find everything from a colonel to a staff sergeant on NSTR. After years on a free version of Microsoft (MS) Teams, our space currently resides on a Discord server due both to the great features and the unbeatable cost of free.

that require common access cards (CAC) struggle to find participation. Fifteen years ago, Platoon Leaders Forum saw a plunge in participation when it moved behind a CAC wall out of controlled unclassified information concerns. When the majority of conversations no more sensitive than a platoon inventory layout cheat sheet slipped behind the CAC wall, entire year groups of young cadets and lieutenants shifted their attention elsewhere.

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In 2021, we also stood up a sister site on the Special Operations Command's MS Teams site. Coined "Think, Drink, Write, Fight" (TDWF)—a reference to Bill Donovan's OSS, whose ideal recruits were "PhDs that can win a barfight"—it currently has approximately 1,200 members.[9] In the last four years, we've learned a few lessons we thought might help others stand up and run their own online forums.

Lessons Learned

Where is it going to be? Who do you envision joining this group? Where do they work? How do they connect? We all have too many apps and too many accounts to check, and you're looking to add to it, so finding the right medium is key. Your biggest challenge will be to make it easy to use for each user. Each step that requires a registration, a download, a log in, or a new user interface increases the chance that a new user will become frustrated and do something else. Three-foot walls are your enemy.

Start small. Many groups will start with a simple group text thread. However, unthreaded conversations will quickly outstrip text apps like Signal and Messenger. We recommend finding platforms that are accessible from home, work, and phones. Make it easy to read and share.

For the Army, if you can't get onto the site from the Department of Defense network, you're always going to struggle. But the converse is also true. Sites

There will always be a balance between security and accessibility. We found milSuite never worked for us because it was too clunky, and you needed a CAC card to access it. Chip Bircher found the same, "Consider the mentorship function embedded in Army Career Tracker and the now-defunct mentorship forums on AKO: there is probably a good reason they are *#epicfails*."[10]

The uninformed critic may have concerns about information security. The risk of leaks is mitigated by smart professionals and outweighed by the benefits of mentorship and collaboration. Conversations on NSTR transfer to work networks when appropriate. The grassroots conversations constantly generate increased work collaboration. We've had NSTR conversations that have transferred over to secure networks for smaller discussions. That's a feature, not a bug.

The diversity of your audience is going to make this even more of a challenge because you're going to straddle generations. You'll have the olds who don't want to learn new things, and you'll have youths that already have better tools than the ones you're thinking of. They're both going to be frustrated, never mind the frozen middle that's trying to decide which way to go. Bircher says,

> The mentor must be accessible to the protégé, and must be able to communicate over the medium the protégé prefers. Baby Boomers and Gen Xers are comfortable with face-to-face meetings, phone calls and e-mails. Perhaps even texting now.[11]

X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, and other "town hall" platforms are not great at building communities. They are soapboxes to shout from, and too often, past each other, and you will generally find them to be no more conducive to conversation than what you'll find on Speaker's Corner. They are also rife with toxicity. Their structure and algorithms encourage users to maximize provocative posts. While some content creators make bank on outrage content, it has no place in a professional forum.

Back in 2018, we looked at Discord, Slack, and MS Teams. We liked Slack, but the free version capped out at fifty people. Discord was free but didn't do threaded conversations at the time. So we went with MS Teams, which actually gave us a leg up in 2020 when COVID prompted the Army to accelerate its rollout on NIPR (the Army's nonclassified network). But in 2023, with the sunset of "Microsoft Teams Free (classic)," we had no way to port our old threads to the new version without paying for an upgrade. We returned to Discord to find features like threaded conversations and effortless video chat, which it had lacked previously. There are other tools out there, and more under development every day, but for us, the key features a platform needs are threaded conversations and a cost of $0.

Who do you recruit? You're going to do some recruiting. How many people do you want? Who are you targeting, and how are they joining? We've never openly advertised either TDWF or NSTR, but we also have almost no barrier to letting people in. All it takes is one member to extend an invite and the admins will approve. It creates a sort of manufactured exclusivity. There's value in membership of a secret club. We couldn't join the Warlord Loop, so we made our own, built only on the sales pitch of, "You're the kind of person we think would be interested in this." So don't be afraid to have a very generous acceptance policy hiding behind a subtle recruiting policy.

The best conversations happen when diverse interests start to interact. Engaging, curious, and thoughtful members come from a variety of backgrounds. While this should be focused as a professional forum, the cross-pollination of ideas creates the best content. Baking, irregular warfare, warrior poets, military history, and spicy memes are common themes on NSTR. Be wary of building a mini echo chamber with too narrow a band of perspectives. Ducks pick ducks, so

there's some issues with the above recruiting strategy if you aren't actively seeking out broader backgrounds and viewpoints. We skew heavily nerd on NSTR, so we don't get many contrarian opinions about AI and the future of warfare drone tech. That's a hole in our swing.

Deciding whether you want true name or will tolerate nicknames is always a challenge. We have always preferred true names, but we've also prioritized people engaging more, so we allow nicknames on NSTR.

If you're setting up on an Army system like MS Teams, then true names are going to be the default. But that means that true rank is also going be a part of the equation. This will have an impact on the conversations that people have, and they aren't going to engage as thoroughly in a conversation when there's a concern about rank or retribution.

How do you manage? Most online communities follow a 90-9-1 rule: 90 percent lurkers, 9 percent minor engagement, and just 1 percent of users responsible for the majority of content. You're going to have a lot of lurkers, and that's okay. Lurking counts. Think back to your college lectures. In a classroom of three hundred people, how many different people raised their hands? Twenty? Ten? But everyone benefited from being in the room.

You should always be looking for ways to get your members to engage. When they're ready, they'll try their hand at crafting out a thoughtful response or slinging a spicy meme. In 2023, we had to jump the platform from MS Teams to Discord, and we were actually surprised how many people came along. After years of being part of a respectful and valued community, people didn't want to lose the conversations and the ideas. They jumped into action to port over a lot of great material as we tried to save our own little Library of Alexandria.

Don't forget the first rule of improv.[12] You're going to want to have a few designated "Yes, and" types on your team. Sixty percent of the equation is who's following up a post with a comment that will spark a conversation. When a member shares an article with no context or just an "interesting …" for comment, who follows it up with, "What about this caught your eye?" or "I don't understand what the author meant about 'X,' can you expand?" Don't be afraid to "seed the tip jar" by posting semiregularly or having a few friends make sure to always "yes, and" each other's

posts. Or, put out a marker where everyone must come down on one side or the other. Regular posts drive people to check back in regularly.

You want your community to have healthy conversations. However, there is a line between candor

Rank can also have a chilling effect even when it's not intentional. If you want candid participation, consider how and who shares articles. A battalion commander sharing an article can come off as imperative, both urgent and unimpeachable, even if unintended.

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and toxicity. Good-faith arguments are made when members provide respect and extend the benefit of the doubt. Toxic members can ruin your community before it ever gets started. A curt general officer once said about his approach to recruiting talent for a new security forces assistance brigade, "Assholes are an existential threat to my organization."[13]

> Anonymity allows users to engage in frank discussion on challenging topics that they may feel uncomfortable discussing in person. At the same time, this can create echo chambers and subversive discussion that can harm team cohesion or chain of command.
> —FM 6-22, *Developing Leaders*[14]

> Social media made y'all way too comfortable with disrespecting people and not getting punched in the face for it.
> —Mike Tyson[15]

Here's where Dunbar's number helps. Our brains are wired for small communities between 100 and 250 people, which is where NSTR has settled in.[16] When we are in communities, we find it harder to be mean to each other. Your forum, with minimal curation, will become a little village where people will disagree and argue, but still see each other as members of the same tribe.[17]

Have a plan in place for when someone crosses the line and a way for people to report toxic behavior. Even the Warlord Loop evicted members. Collins "enforced rules of civility, declaring himself the group's 'judge, juror and executioner.'"[18]

Sometimes having the battalion operations officer or executive officer share articles would improve the candor and feedback in online conversations. As Bircher remarked,

> Mentors cannot adopt a pedantic, over-bearing approach to dispensing guidance. The communication must take the form of a conversation, one in which listening is just as important as talking.[19]

In the end, *follow this simple rule: If you are a senior, you must remember those junior to you are just you + time. Juniors should remember seniors are just them + experiences.* The purpose is the exchange of ideas. Dismissing a subordinate's post simply because they are junior is failing to engage with their idea. Your experience may give you insight, but it could also be from a specific context, one that you might not see is irrelevant to a new one. Every new idea was a stupid one until it wasn't.

Conclusion

Mentorship is one of the most impactful things you will do in your career. Many of us are veterans of the longest sustained combat operations our country has ever known, and we owe it to those who helped us through those years to pass the lessons we learned on to our subordinates. Simultaneously, the next generation owe us the latest ideas and innovations we are too old to know about. And they need to help us see the contexts our experiences were in. War's nature does not change, but its character does, and subordinates can help us see which lessons we learned are which.

Mentorship comes in many shapes and sizes. Consider supporting informal mentorship and networking communities by setting up and moderating

an informal online community. Start with a thread of like-minded professionals willing to engage in new ideas, but quickly stretch yourself past those, just as Collins did with the Warlord Loop:

> The eclectic online group also included historians, journalists and anthropologists. "He had a deep curiosity and respected people's ideas regardless of age, rank or experience," said Maxwell, a retired Special Operations colonel.[20] ∎

The authors owe a debt to the over one thousand members of NSTR and TDWF who have joined, posted, lurked, and worked to make both communities the tribes they are today.

Notes

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17. *The Internet Is Worse Than Ever—Now What?*, YouTube video, posted by "Kurzgesagt—In a Nutshell," 2:42–3:10, 29 November 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuFlMtZmvY0.

18. Jaffe, "John Collins."

19. Bircher, "Mentorship."

20. Jaffe, "John Collins."