



The battalion commander briefs paratroopers 13 June 2018 prior to a joint forcible entry assault mission in northern Italy during Rock Drop, a multinational training exercise that validated the entire 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade. (Photo by Lt. Col. John Hall, U.S. Army)

Speech

It's a Technique

Maj. George J. Fust, U.S. Army

A leader who cannot stand in front of a group and confidently present ideas or brief a plan is a leader missing an opportunity. The spoken word is, and will remain, the foundation for how we communicate, inspiring others and provoking thought. Yet, we are rarely deliberate in leveraging the power of speech. Socrates made speech famous as a tool, but

speech predates the written form as a method for transmitting knowledge. Speech is a critical component of professional discourse among our ranks but remains an underutilized tool.

Creating an effective environment for professional discourse is inherently multidimensional. Far too often, an overreliance on one technique or a methodology of

convenience generates suboptimal results. For maximum participation and retention, a variety of pedagogical approaches should be considered. One often hides in plain sight: speech. We use it every moment of the day. We employ it as a primary mechanism for communication, and yet we exclude it from leader development plans.

What follows are a variety of ideas to help inspire your organization to think beyond traditional leader development ideas. These methods include TED Talks, debates, podcasts and audiobooks, and storytelling. While not all inclusive, the ideas below can generate creative approaches in your organization to promote alternative learning and skill-development methods. They all share speech as the primary medium for unironically sparking a discussion that makes our Army better.

The “TED Talk”

With “talk” in the title, this approach is straightforward.¹ The concept of a TED Talk in an Army unit aligns with the spirit of the nationally recognized organization of the same name.² A key difference, however, is the Army version could include a question-and-answer session, and presentations can be a team activity that employs more than one speaker. A “talk” series is simple. Elements within an organization rotate responsibility for a focused-topic presentation. The idea is to go a mile deep, focusing on depth over breadth. The topics are ideally centered around the presenter’s area of operations, warfighting function, unit requirements, or the like. It can also cover current events or a particular passion of a unit member. At its best, it drives discussion and understanding.

Once a schedule is drafted on who or what element is responsible for the delivery, the next phase is research. The individual or group should spend ample time deep-diving the subject. This may include reaching out to subject-matter experts or reading technical documents. A talk is not meant simply to inform. Instead, it should also inspire and generate discussion. The presentation format differs from standard Army briefing styles in that it can be more relaxed and include audience interaction. It can also occur in a variety of venues limited only by one’s imagination. If necessary, slides or other visuals accompanying the talk should be complementary and not the central focus. If

possible, visuals should be avoided; the emphasis is on the persuasiveness of the speech.

To maximize the value of the talk, spread the invite list wide or tailor it to a specific audience. Ask your higher headquarters and adjacent units to attend. Whoever the topic is relevant to should be encouraged to attend as time and mission allow. The benefit to the profession comes both in greater understanding of the subject discussed and in preparing and delivering the presentation. Executive communication and research skills are valuable attributes and create a foundation for contributing to professional discourse in other ways. A unit TED Talk is one of many speech-focused methods to improve your unit’s leader development program.

Example. A soldier on staff duty generates a short current event essay about TikTok. He doesn’t understand why the technology is a national security concern and why countries are considering banning it.

These sorts of topics are generated throughout a duty day and are a perfect candidate for a unit TED Talk. The subject is topical and relevant. The next steps are simple: (1) assign a team or action officer, (2) give a set period for research, (3) coordinate a venue, and (4) execute the talk. Bonus points for enlisting the help of a cyber officer or elevating the conversation to a classified level (although this may limit the audience). Consider the following:

- The best topics are those the formation is interested in or those that relate directly to the unit’s mission.
- Be sure to choose the best venue. A video teleconference dial-in or a large space may be required.
- Don’t forget the rehearsal.³ The delivery of the brief is just as important as the content. The brief should inspire

Maj. George J. Fust is an active-duty Army officer in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility, where he is an intelligence officer and advisor to senior leaders within U.S. Army Pacific. He is a graduate of Duke University and an adjunct professor of political science at the University of Texas. Fust previously taught in the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy and served in the 75th Ranger Regiment. He has multiple deployments and experience in Europe, Africa, and Asia.



Lt. Gen. Mike Lundy, then commanding general of the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center and commandant of the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, holds a Q&A session 14 August 2017 with the CGSC class of 2018. (Photo by Dan Neal, U.S. Army)

and inform. It should leave a lasting impression and drive follow-on conversation. A weak or unprepared delivery is likely to have an opposite effect.

Let's Have a Debate

Competition is a powerful motivator. The desire to win can be harnessed in the name of professional development. With a little planning, you can unleash the intellect of your formation through debates.⁴

The “debate” referred to here is neither the cross-cubicle banter of two staff officers nor a contentious meeting. Debate, in this sense, is a deliberate and structured spoken contest with a judge.⁵ It requires published rules and guidelines, time for research, and a topic narrow enough to avoid tangents. Common formats include the Lincoln-Douglas, Policy, or Oxford—each has its own rules and customs; however, these may not

be the most suitable for your organization.⁶ A simple style of alternating five-minute speeches can have the intended effect. Strive to have as much “evidence” as possible presented. Another option is for teams or individuals to prepare to debate both sides of an argument with a coin toss shortly before the event to determine the participant’s position.

On the method of debates, we can learn from our Australian allies who have institutionalized debate as a mechanism for enhancing understanding and strengthening their army.⁷ Formal debates reinforce learning throughout the Australian Army’s professional military education system and help operational units explore concepts of interest. Typically, their executive officer-equivalent selects topics and forms teams. Debate subjects include tactical through strategic considerations such as unit force design, the employment of a new weapon system, or the unknowns of future

warfare.⁸ The guiding philosophy is to choose a topic relevant to your organization.

Once the teams are selected and the topic decided, the next step is identifying a venue and time for execution. Ensure ample time is afforded for the participants to thoroughly research their main argument and supporting ideas. Competition will drive this self-discovery.

In addition to time, a set of rules for the debate format must be posted to ensure fairness and structure.⁹ If the limit for the event is one hour, consider how much time each side gets for an opening statement, main argument, and rebuttal. Multiple “rounds” can be leveraged, or a point system can be implemented with an unbiased judge or judges. Get creative! Invite a guest judge or subject-matter expert as a witness. Yes, the goal is to “win,” but the journey to get there will involve a deep understanding and retention of subject-matter relative to the profession. Other considerations include providing read-ahead material and a postdebate discussion that includes the judges’ reasoning for selecting the winner. Bonus points if the debate is captured in a summary paper for posterity and wider dissemination.

Example. An intelligence organization in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command region receives a request for information: Which People’s Liberation Army theater command has the highest readiness and capability? The standard approach is to search existing databases, reach out to the interagency, and generate a white paper. A debate can be employed to augment this effort.

The debate method will leverage people’s natural competitive spirit to win while encouraging significant effort. It will likely cause analysts to invoke a variety of metrics to support their argument. These include historical training events, unit proficiency, current operations, order of battle, assigned tasks, equipment modernization, leadership personalities, and experience, to name a few.

The teams are incentivized to research and understand all the various aspects associated with readiness and capability. In doing so, they will naturally compare their knowledge of the U.S. Army as a model for understanding the foreign military. This strengthens their understanding of both militaries. It will also highlight gaps in knowledge and lead to deep dives for the answer.

The most competitive among them will solicit insight from experts in the field or even memorize

facts related to the People’s Liberation Army. All these aspects will assist in the debate and make them better intel analysts. They will identify resources and publications for future use. They will have a better holistic understanding of the area of emphasis while getting valuable public speaking experience.

Ultimately, the debate method provides a creative opportunity to think critically about a subject. Encouraging an audience increases learning potential. In this example, the end result is a better-informed answer to a request for information a decision-maker will use coupled with great training for the analysts.

Put the Headphones On

The ubiquity of technology offers additional audible mechanisms for professional discourse. Podcasts and audiobooks are viable alternatives to traditional written mediums. For the soldier in your formation who “hates reading” or gets bored with PowerPoint presentations, headphones can open a new learning path. The Army and affiliated institutions such as the Modern War Institute, the Sosh Research Lab, the Army War College, and a plethora of active-duty influencers generate podcasts; even the Training and Doctrine Command got into the business of releasing doctrinal manuals in audiobook form.¹⁰ We’re in a renaissance period of content creators with ample subjects and material for any interest. The key is harnessing this option for your unit’s professional development.

As with the other options mentioned, a deliberate and structured approach will yield the best results. Merely handing a book to someone and asking them to read it will miss an opportunity. Mentorship is valuable because the mentor can guide the uninitiated. Layer the model when promoting podcasts or audiobook use. A few helpful ideas to get started follow:

- ◆ Crowdsource ideas from your formation. Ask for “must listen to” or specific episodes that are helpful to onboard someone in the unit. Generate a list and publish it.
- ◆ Assign “discussion leaders” responsible for generating read-ahead questions or topics of discussion. They are the guide for the duration of the book or podcast.
- ◆ Have a dedicated discussion session after the listening period. Rotate discussion leaders throughout the year and vary the topics to listen to.

- An alternative approach is a closed group chat exclusively focused on the book or podcast. A conversation in stride can occur in this forum.¹¹

Books and podcasts can and should be used to supplement other leader development events. They can serve as preparation for debates or an upcoming visit from a senior leader. The beauty of a headphones approach is its flexibility. Individuals can listen during their commute or treadmill run. They can listen during their lunch break or in sound bites for as long as their attention span allows. The point is to offer an alternative that appeals to a generation connected to devices.

Here are a few words of caution. Units should avoid starting their own podcast or audiobook effort. The resources required and time commitment will detract from the unit's mission. Instead, consider serving as a guest on an existing platform. Podcasts and audiobooks may not be for everyone so vary their usage with other methods.

Storytelling

Much has been written about the power and effectiveness of storytelling for learning.¹² We sometimes leverage it without conscious thought. The act is as old as speech itself, used to capture experience and create culture. Organizations who use storytelling intentionally to promote professional discourse are employing a powerful human connection that transcends pedagogical preferences. Speech in this form taps into emotion and realism. Both factors are helpful for retention and understanding.

Everyone has a story to tell and this technique should be considered across echelons and age groups. Imagine standard Army resiliency training.¹³ Slides with statistics are displayed. A chaplain or senior NCO offers vignettes and resources. Maybe a handout is given with guidance for helping a fellow soldier in distress. Did this training have the intended effect? Being informational is better than nothing; however, storytelling can make it real and make it stick.

If a soldier who has experienced personal loss were to describe the circumstances and feelings associated with their loss, the audience is more likely to be drawn in. They are more likely to remember the underlying themes. Sensitivity should be paramount when

soliciting volunteers to provide realistic examples on this topic and others that are uncomfortable. The personal touch of a story can also help during counseling and while navigating a crisis or difficult event. The stories provide hope. We made it through last time, and now we can learn from past actions for this current event.

Storytelling historical events can also apply even in the absence of direct experience. The most common example is during staff rides.¹⁴ History is a great repository for tailoring the message to a leader development goal. It helps transmit unit heritage with applications for understanding the future. With respect to the future, storytelling can also be in fictional form. We do it during mission planning when describing potential enemy actions. Additionally, units can deliberately employ fictional storytelling as a way to understand future technology employment or tactical changes. P. W. Singer and August Cole's novel *Ghost Fleet* is a great example. Nothing is stopping you from implementing a brown bag lunch, whereby a unit member tells a creative, fictional story relevant to their warfighting function or area of operations. The group can then discuss the hypothetical branches or sequels.

Don't forget the story when devising a leader development plan or trying to encourage participation in professional discourse. If you don't have it, invite a guest speaker who does. Ask the medic with a combat medic badge to assist during medical lanes. He will likely offer reinforcing stories that make the training real, urgent, and personal. Stories are the so what. Use them.

Conclusion

The power of speech in professional discourse should be deliberately employed to maximize leader development and foster ideas that make the Army better. Everyone learns and retains information differently. Speech is a universal mechanism for transmitting ideas: it can inspire, spark creativity, and appeal to those of the next generation turned off by traditional mediums. Speech as a deliberate professional development tool in a unit program provides an option for renewing and encouraging professional discourse that adds to the efforts for publishing articles discussed throughout this compilation. ■

Notes

1. George Fust, "USARPAC ACE 'TED Talk,'" Harding Project, 21 May 2024, <https://www.hardingproject.com/p/usarpac-ace-ted-talk>.
2. "Our Organization," TED, accessed 29 May 2024, <https://www.ted.com/about>.
3. George Fust and Michael Vance, "Have We Forgotten the Rehearsal?," NCO Journal, 6 September 2022, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2022/September/Have-We-Forgotten-the-Rehearsal/>.
4. "Want to Facilitate a Debate in Your Class?," Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University, accessed 29 May 2024, <https://ablconnect.harvard.edu/files/ablconnect/files/want-to-facilitate-a-debate-in-your-class.pdf>.
5. Thomas Keller, James Whittaker, and Tracey Burke, "Student Debates in Policy Courses: Promoting Policy Practice Skills and Knowledge through Active Learning," *Journal of Social Work Education* 37, no. 2 (2001): 343–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2001.10779059>.
6. "Formats of Debate," Glen Whitman, accessed 7 June 2024, <https://www.csun.edu/~dgm61315/debformats.html>.
7. U.S. Army Pacific deputy commanding general for strategy (Australian Defence Force), unpublished interview, 11 May 2024, Fort Shafter, HI.
8. Robert Gibson, "How to Create Professional Military Education (PME)," The Cove, 14 June 2022, <https://cove.army.gov.au/article/how-create-professional-military-education>.
9. Matthew Malcolm, "How to Disagree," The Cove, 26 July 2023, <https://cove.army.gov.au/article/how-to-disagree>.
10. The following links to the associated podcasts are provided as a reference tool: "Podcasts," Modern War Institute, accessed 29 May 2024, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/category/podcasts/>; *The SOSH Podcast*, West Point Press, accessed 29 May 2024, <https://westpointpress.com/the-sosh-podcast>; "Podcasts," War Room, U.S. Army War College, accessed 29 May 2024, <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/category/podcasts/>; *The Podcast*, From the Green Notebook, accessed 29 May 2024, <https://from-thegreennotebook.com/category/podcast/>; and "Audiobooks: U.S. Army Combined Arms Center," U.S. Army Central Army Registry, accessed 29 May 2024, https://rdl.train.army.mil/catalog/#/search?current=true&search_terms=audiobook.
11. "Classroom Resources: How to Leverage Podcasts for Learning," IT Teaching Resources, Stanford Graduate School of Education, accessed 29 May 2024, <https://teachingresources.stanford.edu/resources/how-to-leverage-podcasts-for-learning/>.
12. Vanessa Boris, "What Makes Storytelling So Effective for Learning?," *Leading the Way* (blog), Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning, 20 December 2017, <https://www.harvard-business.org/what-makes-storytelling-so-effective-for-learning/>.
13. "Army Suicide Prevention Program," Directorate of Prevention, Resilience, and Readiness, accessed 29 May 2024, <https://www.armyresilience.army.mil/suicide-prevention/pages/about.html>.
14. "Combat Studies Institute Staff Ride Team," Army University Press, accessed 29 May 2024, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Staff-Rides/>.

"Faculty and students alike were most impressed by a former high official in the Communist Party. He was the only guest lecturer invited to spend two days at the college, a favorable reaction brought about by three factors—knowledge of the topics, enthusiasm, and respect for the intellect of his audience. His sole training aids were a piece of chalk and a dilapidated blackboard that looked as if it dated from Napoleon's days at the *École Militaire*."

—Richard J. Stillman, "The Effective Military Speaker—A Dying Art?," *Military Review* 44, no. 8 (August 1964): 7

"The best training aids and the finest ghostwritten talks, however, are not adequate substitutes for the laborious task of knowing one's subject. Perhaps a reevaluation is in order to permit a better balance between the substantive approach and the use of aids. As General Patton said: 'Hard work is the price of successful speaking—so few are willing to pay that price.'"

—Richard J. Stillman, "The Effective Military Speaker—A Dying Art?," *Military Review* 44, no. 8 (August 1964): 10