



**“Bottom up”
mentorship: NCOs
should
also train new LTs.**



NCOs: Training Lieutenants One at a Time

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In 1988, I was serving as a fire team leader when our platoon received another new lieutenant to serve as our platoon leader. He would be the platoon's second new lieutenant in less than a year. I knew what would transpire after his arrival — inventories, inspections, training, training and more training to prepare him for the coming company and battalion field exercises. I didn't like the seemingly constant rotation of new lieutenants; however, I didn't have to. All I had to do was execute the orders that were given to the best of my ability.

What astonished me was that it never seemed to bother our platoon sergeants. They would take possession of the new lieutenants and start the process of training them without a word, or, at least, not one that I heard. They would train them in the job that they would have to perform when the platoon went to war.

One day, I asked our platoon sergeant how he could train lieutenant after lieutenant without so much as a grumble. He looked at me and then his eyes hardened. When he replied his voice carried a tone of dead seriousness, “It's my job. It's my job to get him ready when we have to go to a two-way shooting range. If I don't do that and don't do it right, he ends up dead and we all end up dead.”

He let that implication sink into my thick head for another minute and then finished, “And when you become a platoon sergeant, you'll do the same. If you don't, you'll let him down, your Soldiers down and probably get your platoon killed.”

My platoon sergeant was not simply outlining his responsibility of training and mentoring the new platoon leaders, he was also telling me what would be expected of me when I became a platoon sergeant.

The Role of the NCO as a Subordinate Trainer and Mentor

Field Manual 7-22.7 states, “The platoon sergeant helps the commander to train the lieutenant.” Though training and mentoring are not exactly the same, they do have similarities. The various dictionaries define a mentor as an “experienced or trusted adviser” or “an experienced person in an organization or institution who trains and counsels new employees or students.” A new lieutenant, in most cases, falls into the category of a “new employee.”

Army Regulation 600-100, Army Leadership, defines mentorship. It states that, “Mentorship is the voluntary developmental relationship that exists between a person of greater experience and a person of lesser experience that is characterized by mutual trust and respect.”

With these explanations, you can make the association that the platoon sergeant is a trainer and mentor to the lieutenant. This conclusion is based on the certainty that the platoon sergeant has more knowledge and experience in an area of expertise and that the lieutenant is searching for that same knowledge and experience in that area of expertise.

Some might argue that the relationship is not truly “voluntary” as unit assignments are directed based on Army and unit needs. The facts point out that military service is chosen and with that service the relationship is voluntary, also. It’s voluntary because the platoon sergeant understood that by accepting the position they have implicitly agreed to the task of training the lieutenant and the lieutenant has agreed and understands that the platoon sergeant has more experience than they have ... and they need it!

The NCO as a Role Model

AR 600-100 states that, “Leaders are role models for others. They are viewed as the example and must maintain standards and provide examples of effective behaviors.” It further emphasizes what trust provides in that, “When leaders’ actions occur within a mentorship relationship, their potential impact is greatly magnified, both for the individual and for the Army. This increase is due to the high degree of trust and respect that characterize a mentoring relationship.”

The ranges of behaviors displayed by trainers and mentors are vast and varying, and you can think back on your career for examples. What behaviors, attributes, characteristics and values did some role models exhibit that influenced you in your career and made them a mentor to you? Did they lead by example? Did they take the time to show the correct way to accomplish a task? Did you respect them? Was the person someone that you could trust? Were they positive role models?

Foundation of Trust and First Line of Defense

The Army understands that the new lieutenant will need assistance and training in their duties as an officer. They have been educated that they are to trust their NCOs, specifically their platoon sergeant. Remember though, this trust is not blind. It is a trust that has been instilled in them by others in their commissioning process. They have been told to lean on their platoon sergeant, and platoon NCOs, for advice and listen to their counsel. Don’t violate or misuse this trust.

A Collective Task

The company commander is ultimately responsible for the training and mentoring of their lieutenants. The commander also has numerous other responsibilities and requirements to manage. They remember that when they were lieutenants, they relied on platoon sergeants and the platoon’s other NCOs, for training and mentoring. Now as the commander they again utilize these resources, specifically the platoon sergeants, to support them in accomplishing the critical, collective task of training their lieutenants.

Why? The Army understands the importance of subordinate mentorship, sometimes referred to as “bottom up” mentorship. It has created a dual-rank structure that supports this relationship and bond. This relationship structure ensures that officers have an NCO working with them at the same organizational level. Lastly, at the platoon level, who knows the most about platoon operations? The platoon sergeant and platoon NCOs do.

The reality is the Army relies on this structure and on the forming of the subordinate-to-senior bond. At the platoon level this dual structure, and the bond, is critical in shaping the lieutenant. When done correctly, this relationship bond and the trust it generates is carried by lieutenants throughout their careers. This trust further builds the foundation that lieutenants will be expecting and will count on from the other NCOs who support them for the rest of their career.

I conducted a small and informal survey of 20 commissioned officers that I currently work with. They ranked from major to colonel and all of them indicated that NCOs played a significant role in training and mentoring them. The question posed was: As a lieutenant, which unit NCO did you consider your best source of mentorship — platoon sergeant, first sergeant or sergeant major? Sixteen of those officers responded that their platoon sergeant had been their best source, while four answered with first sergeant.

Again, this straw poll was very small; however, the results indicated that 80 percent of these field-grade and senior officers regarded their platoon sergeant as their subordinate mentor. Almost everyone had posi-

tive memories of the relationship and relayed a story that provided further proof of a positive relationship and how it shaped them. Not surprisingly, many had stayed in touch with each other through the years and even credit their platoon sergeant for continuing their service.

Mission and Objectives

In all missions, there are objectives that are expected to be accomplished to make the mission successful. These objectives are developed into objective statements. This statement provides for the desired **effect**, the **target**, the **action** and the **purpose**, or ETAP.

The desired effect in this case is to train and mentor. The target is the lieutenant. The action the Army desires is a junior leader capable of leading his or her platoon. The purpose is accomplishing the mission and caring for soldiers.

The objective statement for this is — train and mentor lieutenants to lead and care for their platoon to accomplish their assigned mission. Sounds simple, right? With the right resources it can be. The largest resource is the NCO Corps and those NCOs willing to accept the challenge.

Challenge

Who will be regarded as the greatest mentor to your lieutenant? To say that it depends may be correct; however, the variables to the challenge are constant. The variables are the situation, the mentee and the mentor. The situation is success or failure, or life and death. The lieutenant, or mentee, is there to learn, gain experience and be successful. That leaves the platoon sergeant and the platoon NCOs, the trainers and mentors.

NCOs should ask themselves these questions: Will you serve as that role model? Will you provide that foundation of trust, support, encouragement and personal guidance? Will you be that benchmark NCO for that lieutenant to use for the rest of their career?

An NCO's commitment to the task can have a huge impact on the Army. That impact is not only shaping those lieutenants and the officer corps, but also for those young Soldiers watching you execute the task, because those Soldiers are the NCO Corps and platoon sergeants of tomorrow. ■

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