

Today's NCO: Adaptive and Continual Learners

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In November 1996, I was stationed in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia as a new member of the Transportation Corps. I had been an infantryman until earlier that year, when an injury and medical reclassification placed me in this new career. It was a drastic change.

As my first assignment, I was to be the first permanently assigned noncommissioned officer with Military Traffic Management Command to the 1311th Medium Port Command and the NCO in charge of the Saudi Arabia Detachment. The officer and the rest of the support team were there on temporary duty. The reason for change to a permanent assignment was relayed to me as, "We have problems that can't be fixed with 90-day TDYs".

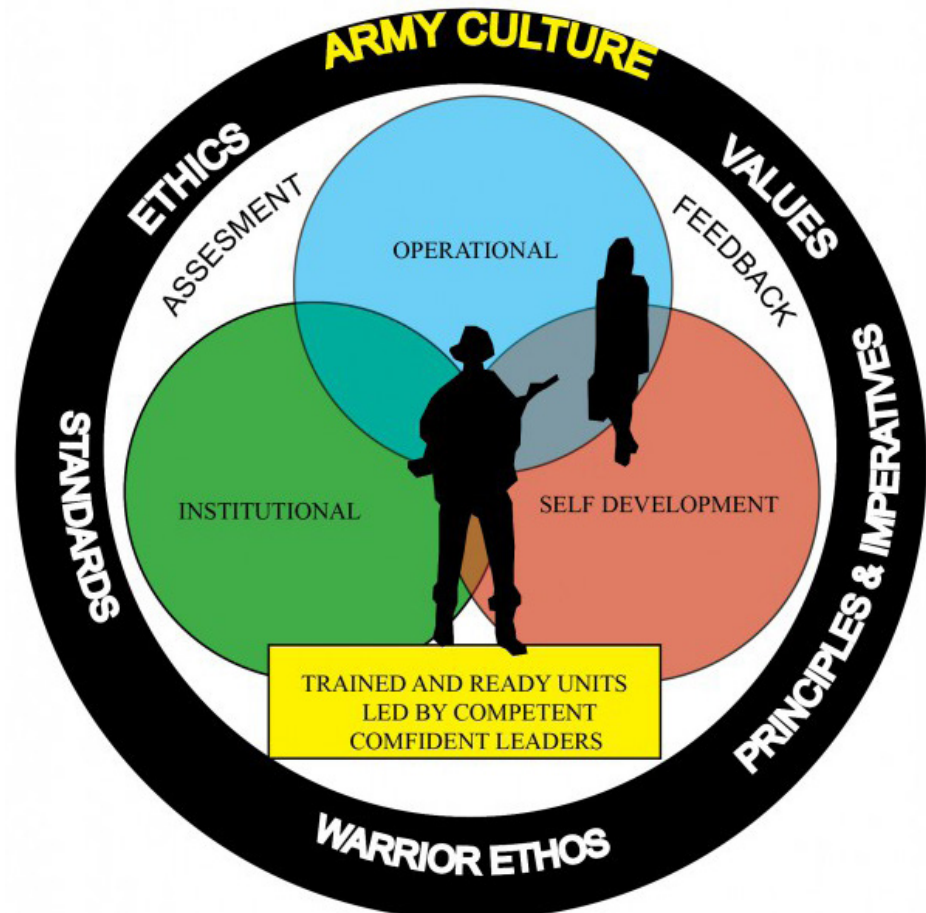
To prepare me for my new job in theater movement control, the Army sent me to about 14 weeks' worth of different military schools. Armed with this and a vague understanding of what was expected of me, I prepared to depart. I was apprehensive to say the least, and it was not about the location. The apprehension stemmed from being in a new career and, in truth, possibly failing.

As I was out-processing, my battalion command sergeant major requested that I come in for a talk. It was common practice that all staff sergeants and above would "out-brief" prior to departing. Afterward,

I asked him for some additional time and relayed to him my apprehension and concern.

What he shared with me that afternoon was advice that I have since given to many Soldiers: "Wesson, I don't know anything about the job you're heading to, but I do know a few things. If you don't know the job, then learn it. If they can't tell you what the job is, then you figure it out and then tell them what the job is. Don't wait for someone to teach you. Learn the job and keep learning. Never stop. You never know what you might need to get the mission accomplished."

Lastly he said, "Remember, if it was easy, then they wouldn't give it to an NCO."



Learning and Adapting

Why is adapting important? Because it establishes a foundation of learning for the NCO Corps, it also tells the Army that the NCO Corps understands that adapting and learning in the operating environment are critical for success. It further stresses that failure to do either can result in mission failure, and for the NCO Corps, failure is not an option.

In the complex operating environment that the NCOs of today find themselves in, there seems to be one constant: change. This constant change is challenging for NCOs. However, it is a challenge that the NCO Corps has risen to meet for more than 200 years.

During the past decade, NCOs have created and refined the knowledge, skills and abilities required for their units' successful operations. How is this accomplished? The NCO Corps is made of professionals and perpetual, or continuous, learners.

Continuous Learning

AR 350-1, *Army Training and Leader Development*, or ATLD, says that training occurs in three distinct domains: institutional, operational and self-development. Included throughout these training domains is leader development and education. The ATLD model shown below portrays these three domains. Though they are separate and distinct, they overlap and join to ensure that the Army has NCOs who are prepared to train the Army and ready their units for unified land operations.

The institutional domain, also referred to as the generating force, is where the NCO Corps receives functional and professional military education. The operating domain encompasses home-station leader development, training and education activities that NCOs require to prepare themselves, their Soldiers and their units for employment. The self-development domain provides for the NCO Corps a medium for training and education and stresses the importance of "continuous, life-long learning."

Continuous learning is foundational in the self-development domain. In this domain, NCOs are compelled to recognize certain facts. One of these facts is that structured training activities in formal schools and operational units do not meet every mission requirement or individual need. These deficiencies are referred to as training gaps.

The continuous learner recognizes these training gaps and that to solve this challenge, the NCO must search for solutions to bridge those gaps. In the search for a training solution, NCOs bridge the gap and further their professional and personal growth. This growth benefits both the NCO and their unit—not only in their current assignment but also for their future assignments.

Operational Need

NCOs understand that, in the complex environment in which we operate, the Army requires professionals who are continual learners. As professionals, and as stated in the NCO Vision, the Army "values perpetual learners."

Regardless of an NCO's military occupation specialty, the NCO Creed requires all NCOs to "remain tactically and technically proficient." The only manner to achieve this end is through continual learning.

The continuous learning required to remain tactically and technically proficient is not new. But has been made more challenging because of the complex operating environment that the Army and the NCO Corps has found themselves in during the past 20 years. This environment encourages and demands of its leaders continuous learning as a fact of life and a matter of survival. It also challenges many NCOs because, to an NCO, as stated previously, mission failure is not an option.

Warrior and Civilian Training and Education

Warrior, MOS and leader skills are paramount for the NCO Corps' continuous learning. These are the lifeblood of the Army and what the Army relies on the NCO Corps to train all Soldiers—officers and enlisted. However, in this immense effort, the NCO should remember that civilian education can also be a combat multiplier.

Civilian education and training can be used to complement and expand leader skills. It provides the science to NCOs that builds and complements their understanding of the art—the skills—they have already been employing. This understanding will supplement the NCO with deeper knowledge that will build their self confidence. This self-confidence in turn is relayed to all Soldiers, and those Soldiers become continuous learners also.

Challenge

Consider that the first line of the NCO Creed supports continual learning. It makes a bold declaration for the Army and the nation that "No one is more professional than I." Its declaration is one that many of the NCOs who have helped shape the Army have lived up to. These NCOs were indeed the epitome of professionalism and continual learners.

NCOs have numerous methods to meet the challenge and to gain the education, training and skills required for success. As a continual learner, you gain the arsenal of tools you require to shape yourself, to train your Soldiers and to accomplish the mission. However, these methods require a dedication—a dedication to the profession, a dedication to the mission, and a dedication to your Soldiers.

The challenge is difficult and multifaceted. It's compounded further by complex mission sets and in the increasingly complex operational environment that NCOs finds themselves in. However, it's not impossible.

There are mentors to guide and lead the way for those NCOs who rise to meet the challenge. Are you

that NCO? Are you the continual learner whom your Soldiers—both officer and enlisted—require? Consider what my former command sergeant major said to me: "If it (the task) was easy, then they (the Army) wouldn't give it to an NCO." ■

Cameron M. Wesson is a retired first sergeant with more than 21 years of active duty experience with extensive leadership assignments in the infantry and logistics career fields. He has had numerous overseas deployments that include Central America, Korea, Europe, the Balkans and Southwest Asia. He is currently a Department of the Army civilian and serves as the deputy director for the U.S. Army Information Operations Proponent, U.S. Army Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.



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