



The U.S. Army promoted Master Sgt. Frank Munley from the rank of sergeant first class, effective Feb. 1. Command Sgt. Maj. Lebert Beharie, senior noncommissioned officer for the U.S. Army Research, Development and Engineering Command, congratulates Munley on his promotion. Munley is assigned to the office of the RDECOM command sergeant major. (U.S. Army Photo)

USASMA Begins Work on New Master Leader Course

By Meghan Portillo

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The Army has announced plans to create a new level of the NCO Education System — a new Master Leader Course that will be a branch-immaterial course attended by NCOs after the Senior Leader Course and before the Sergeants Major Course.

Senior NCO leaders say they identified a knowledge gap within the E-8 population. To address the issue and better prepare master sergeants and sergeants first class promotable for their responsibilities, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command tasked the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas, to create the MLC.

Command Sgt. Maj. Dennis E. Defreese, USASMA's commandant, said the academy plans to start a pilot course by fall of 2015. The course would be implemented Army-wide after three iterations of the pilot, he said.

Filling the Gap

This knowledge gap within the force was caused in part when the Army developed Skill Level 6 a couple of years ago, Defreese explained. Both E-8s and E-9s were once classified as Skill Level 5 personnel, but once Skill Level 6 was developed, many critical common tasks shifted to E-9s. That said, it remains unclear which critical tasks should be assigned to Skill Level 5, he said.

“You have clear tasks, conditions and standards that have been established for an E-7,” said Charles Guyette, the director of USASMA's Directorate of Training. “When you get into Skill Levels 5 and 6, those tasks have not been fully developed as far as understanding what the tasks, conditions and stan-

dards are going to be. ... We really have to get into the meat of the tasks and how we are going to write them in order to develop the lesson plans and get them into a course [format].”

To analyze the tasks that should be assigned to E-8s, USASMA hosted a critical task site selection board. Board members, including command sergeants major and battalion commanders selected from across the Army, gathered at USASMA in October. They agreed that there was a knowledge gap at Skill Level 5, and that many master sergeants entering the Sergeants Major Course have not been prepared for their studies. The board partially blamed the fact that it is often more than five years between the time an NCO attends the Senior Leader Course and the time he or she is selected for the Sergeants Major Course, which has been made even more challenging in the past few years.

The board identified skills and attributes E-8s should possess and areas of study that should be taught in a potential Master Leader Course before NCOs go to the Sergeants Major Course, including oral and written communication, critical thinking and problem solving, management, preparing and conducting briefings, and knowledge of the military decision-making process.

“When we elevate an E-7 or an E-8 from a company level organization and move them up to the battalion level and higher, they [often] have had no experience in how the headquarters operates as far as the interaction between staff agencies,” Guyette said. “So they are coming in with a very hard learning curve to grasp and comprehend what they have to do to get integrated, and what their role and functions are within that staff.”

“I’ll quote one of the board members,” Defreese said. “Command Sgt. Maj. Brunk W. Conley, who is the National Guard CSM, said that when he was a sergeant first class, a platoon sergeant, he kind of knew what he would need to do as a first sergeant because he watched his first sergeant every day and was mentored by him. But when he made E-8 and was reassigned to a corps staff or to a two – or three-star [general’s] staff to work as an NCO in a staff section, he had never seen that before. That was a huge gap in learning.”

Defreese said the new Master Leader Course will significantly improve NCOs’ ability to see the bigger picture and to understand mission command. After completing this course, NCO graduates will be better able to “understand, visualize, direct, assist, train and lead,” he said.

NCOs at the E-8 level need to know more than just how to do their jobs well, Guyette said. They need to understand the art and science of leading.

“I always use baseball as an analogy,” Guyette said. “If I’m here to learn how to be a first baseman, I’m going to learn everything I need to know to be a first baseman. But if I need to learn about how to coach — send signals to the baseline coaches or whether the

batter has to bunt, swing away or steal, that’s the science of playing baseball. So we’ve got to teach NCOs — get them away from just knowing what their job is to the science of understanding the Army.”

Developing the Course

USASMA staff members working to develop the MLC are in the first phase of the ADDIE, or Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation and Evaluation, process. As it is early in the process, there are many unknowns about the course, and Defreese said that before decisions can be made, USASMA must analyze carefully the Army’s needs and seek input from every corner.

USASMA began by conducting focus groups with sergeants first class, master sergeants and sergeants major who were at the academy and on Fort Bliss. They were asked to rate 321 critical common tasks on their importance to E-8s. Following these focus groups, the critical task site selection board convened, which included the command sergeants major of TRADOC, U.S. Army Forces Command, the U.S. Army Reserve and the National Guard, three battalion commanders, company commanders and other nominative command sergeants major from TRADOC, FORSCOM and U.S. Army Materiel Command. Board members discussed the tasks and what NCOs need to know to be the best master sergeants possible.

“[The board was asked] to do the same thing that the [earlier] focus groups did ... evaluate the importance of all of those critical tasks we think an E-8 should have,” Defreese said. “We also had discussions with that same group of senior leaders — verbalized what we think an E-8 should possess as far as attributes and skills and knowledge. ... We are analyzing the results of that critical task site selection board now.”

After reviewing the board’s recommendations, USASMA staff members will categorize the critical tasks into the Army’s three domains for learning: the organizational domain, the institutional domain and the self-development domain. That means the tasks will be separated into those that should be taught within a unit, those that should be taught at an institution, and those that should be an NCO’s responsibility. Once they know which tasks should be taught at an institution, they will then be able to determine how long the new Master Leader Course needs to be, where it will be taught and how much of it will be offered through the Army’s online learning systems.

Defreese said USASMA is directing all available resources into creating the new course, as it takes about 450 man-hours to develop one online hour of instruction, and 60 man-hours to develop one hour of face-to-face instruction. He wants to have it ready as soon as possible, he said, but emphasized that USAS-

MA staff members will do whatever is necessary to ensure the course is exactly what the Army needs.

“The USASMA staff is working feverishly to get this done,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Tedd J. Pritchard,

USASMA’s deputy commandant. “[It’s our duty to] provide the right training at the right time for the right Soldiers to go out there and have these strong leadership abilities and skills.” ■



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