



Broadening Opportunities

The Importance of Broadening Our NCO Corps

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As young Soldiers going through basic training in the late 1980s, we were taught that when given an order by an officer or a noncommissioned officer, you executed that order without question. You didn't ask why you needed to do it, and you certainly didn't argue about the justification for doing it. You simply did it because you knew, unequivocally, that it was the right thing to do. I believe that this lack of questioning was based on an internal trust and respect in our leadership, which was taught to us at an early age.

To change with the times and to bring the NCO Corps in line with what is expected of us in the future, we must be better prepared to answer the "why" in any question that is asked of us. To do this successfully, we must become relevant by broadening ourselves through more education and training.

Today, when giving a Soldier tasks to complete, the Soldier often will ask "why" and question the validity of the task or detail. We do not believe that this is because of a lack of trust or to be disrespectful. One must remember the culture in which our young Soldiers have grown up. They do not know a life without im-

mediate access to knowledge; they have grown up with smartphones, computers and social media. If they need to know something, they do not have to find a book to look it up as we were often told to do. They simply looked it up on the World Wide Web. Because of this instant knowledge, they have a stronger desire to know the "why" of things. Both the officer and the NCO Corps need to understand their jobs in ways that were not required 20 years ago. If they cannot answer or explain the "why," their Soldiers will get the "why" somewhere else — perhaps from other Soldiers, the internet, or from a source outside their chain of command. When a Soldier seeks answers in this manner, can we really control the validity of the answers received, and more importantly, passed along as truth? Each of these solutions takes away from the trust building between Soldiers and leaders.

Conversely, young leaders were taught that there was a difference between officer business and NCO business, and seldom did the two overlap. As a young sergeant, I can recall platoon sergeants saying not to worry about certain things because that was officer business and that the platoon leader would take care of it.

As I moved up the NCO ranks to a position where I needed to advise my platoon leader, I quickly learned that officers took information from their NCOs with a grain of salt. They listened to it, but more often than not, it was quickly dismissed if the officer received different advice from another officer, no matter the other officer's rank, duty position or area of concentration. Simply put, officers trusted officers.

The root issue is relevance. The noncommissioned officer of today must evolve and understand that, as we ascend in rank, we must modify our leadership style and performance to keep our relevance as our situation changes. A team leader must comprehend and master troop-leading procedures. The platoon sergeant must become a master trainer and facilitator. The unit first sergeant must become a master of systems while simultaneously being the up-front, in-the-thick-of-it-leader, and the sergeant major must understand intricacies and nuances of complex situations so that he or she can better advise and assist officer counterparts. Anything short of these skill sets leaves us less relevant.

In the late '80s and early '90s, NCO education came from the noncommissioned officer education system, and really nothing else. College was not pushed, and it was rarely sought out. Officers knew that they were better educated. So, officers believed that their reasoning and understanding of complex tasks and strategies was better than that of the enlisted corps. Bottom line: Education equaled knowledge.

There is a very big difference between the Army of the '80s and today.

To begin with, there is no such thing as "officer business" and "NCO business." As my first squadron commander stated in his initial counseling to me in 2012, there is only "leader business."

The confusion originates with the word "business." We should call it what it is: responsibility. AR 600-20, Army Command Policy, 6 November 2014 clearly identifies in Chapter 2-18 that the NCO support channel will assist the chain of command in accomplishing 10 specific aspects of our profession. It is a misunderstanding that leads us to believe that there is a prohibition on NCO involvement, when the preceding sentence identifies it as the NCO who "assists" the chain of command.

Additionally, education is now a necessity. In 2010, 29.9 percent of enlisted Soldiers had a bachelor's degree or higher. This is a far cry from the less than 10 percent who had any type of secondary education in 1987. In 2015, roughly 59 percent of the enlisted corps has some college, and many at the sergeant major level have graduate degrees. The education gap between the officer and enlisted corps is dwindling.

This narrowing of the education gap means that our NCO Corps must continue to receive advanced training and broadening experiences beyond their NCOES

requirements as they move up their career ladders, just as our officer counterparts receive. Failure to allow advanced training and studies could be detrimental to the advisory role noncommissioned officers provide to their commissioned counterparts.

One type of broadening experience is the Strategic Fellows Program at The Institute of World Politics. This is an intensive three-week program focused on providing selectees a guided introduction to the development of national security policy at the strategic and federal level. Led by expert scholar-practitioners from the institute, the participants explore key strategic issues through a combination of graduate-level lectures and hands-on activities. The program emphasizes critical thinking, effective oral and written communication, and enhanced appreciation for the Department of Defense's geo-strategic priorities. In addition, participants explore sources of friction and opportunities to enhance integration in the policy-making process among the Department of Defense and the congressional and executive branches. Participants also learn about one another's functions so that critical decision-making can be more collaborative. When Soldiers master the arts of statecraft, they will be better at discerning, forecasting, preventing, mitigating, managing and, if necessary, prevailing in international conflicts.

Including NCOs in broadening seminars has proven to be a challenging task. Our culture has not allowed for such an inclusion. The U.S. Army has rightly invested the time and resources into educating its members in an attempt to groom the next generation of future thinkers, capable of comprehending the complexities that are included in the many facets of today's global community and threats. The NCO Corps traditionally supports the chain of command but can better contribute in this arena if given the opportunity. With minimal evolution, we can improve our worth and contribution to our legacy as the "backbone of the Army."

In a July 10, 2014, briefing by Human Resources Command to Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, the addition of broadening assignments, seminars and courses was identified as an important cog in building the NCO Corps of 2035. "To develop the Soldier of 2014 into an agile and adaptive first sergeant or command sergeant major of 2035, leader development must allow NCOs to build experience in multiple environments versus single tracking in one formation with little to no broadening," according to the brief. "Promotion boards must recognize and reward this experience and diversity."

NCOs must search for and attend these broadening experiences. They must get out of their comfort zones and strive for advanced knowledge. They must do this for several reasons. First and foremost is to improve our relevance as the "backbone of the Army." Second, we

must do this to better explain the “why.” We must be able to explain the “why” to our Soldiers, and we must be able to explain the “why” to our officer counterparts whom we advise.

Army leadership is making a conscious effort to provide NCOs these broadening opportunities, and we must take advantage of them. The ball is in our court. Let’s not drop it. ■

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