



Sgt. Zachary Hudson points out targets to Pfc. Jeffrey Skinner during a live-fire assault as part of Oak Edge, May 10, 2017, in the Donnelly Training area near Fort Greely, Alaska. Both Soldiers are part of the 6th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division. (U.S. Army photo by John Pennell)

# Using experience to bridge the gap

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**A**s noncommissioned officers, one of our primary goals is to impart our career experience onto our Soldiers. An NCO's hard-earned wisdom can influence their Soldiers' professional development significantly. It can affect how they address issues and solve problems; how they mentor their Soldiers when they eventually take on leadership roles; and how they develop tactical and technical proficiencies in combat environments. NCOs prepare their Soldiers for the future by building a strong foundation for their Soldiers to build upon.

## **Doctrine & Experience**

Army doctrine recognizes and encourages Soldiers to share their experiences. The *Army Leader Development*

*Strategy* defines its mission under "Strategic vision" to "train, educate, and provide experiences to progressively develop leaders to prevail in unified land operations," (DA PAM 600-25, 2017, p. 2, para. 2). However, there is a constant debate among NCOs regarding the most effective approach to teaching.

There are different methods, and knowing your Soldiers is the key to teaching them. Not all Soldiers learn in the same way or style. Some learn visually while others are hands-on. There are also Soldiers who will need additional mentoring to fully grasp the concept. NCOs must adapt their training strategies to each Soldier.

Army Training and Doctrine Command supports unit training. There are plenty of [resources](#) dedicated to

fulfilling this role; from training circulars and field manuals to Army doctrine publications and Army doctrine reference publications. However, doctrine is slow and difficult to adapt over time, which is where an NCO's experience can bridge the knowledge gap.

For example, Army doctrine emphasizes the use of Battle Drill 1A in training to assault an enemy ambush. However, if an NCO adjusts that drill based on lessons learned during combat deployments, and incorporates the adjustments into his or her tactics and techniques; it should also be passed down to their formations along with doctrinal training.

Introducing real problems into Soldier training is even more important. Radio failure, division of friendly forces, weapons stoppages and failures, or any other problems NCOs experience in combat add realism to training.

An even more basic and common example of an NCO's experience helping a Soldier bridge the gap between doctrine and regulation with experience is when a Soldier must navigate [Army Regulation 670-1](#), *Wear and appearance of Army uniforms and insignia*, and [Department of the Army pamphlet 670-1](#), *Guide to the wear and appearance of Army uniforms and insignia*, to set up their service uniform. These publications can be difficult to understand, particularly for female Soldiers' dress uniforms. NCOs can draw from their personal experiences as a guide to educate Soldiers on how to interpret the regulations.

## Mentorship

NCOs must mentor their Soldiers. The Army defines mentorship as "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," (FM 6-22, 2015).

Soldiers show more interest in lessons learned from experience mainly because they understand the methods were tested in real-world situations and had successful results. Such training can have a greater effect, provide a faster result, or be easier than the longer doctrinal method. One of the Army's four defined roles of a mentor is "shares," with an emphasis on "sharing experiences that contributed to personal success," (FM 6-22, 2015).

Not to say doctrinal training methods are wrong. They are the foundation of military training and provide Soldiers with the correct and most basic elements of a subject. However, passing on doctrinal TTPs and personal combat experiences can add to the training process and possibly save Soldiers' lives.

## Institutional Learning

The Army teaches the fundamentals to Soldiers when they enter *Basic Combat Training*, followed by *Advanced Individual Training*, and later the *Basic Leader Course*. Unfortunately, these institutional areas of development

are slow to adapt and update their curriculum to current challenges. It can take years for changes to occur, and by the time they do, they may already be outdated. NCOs must draw on their experience, which is current and relevant to today's battlefield, to help fill this void when they train their Soldiers.

I can relate to this issue from personal experience. During *BLC*, we were taught the previous version of the Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Report, even though the new NCOER was implemented two weeks later.

## Teaching from Experience

NCOs may ask, "How do I convey my experience to my Soldiers?"

We are in an era where a slideshow presentation is the go-to training option. How did this happen? It might be because it is an easy way to create a lesson plan and you can make a decent slideshow in less than an hour. However, slideshows should only be used to introduce the basic elements of a subject.

Group or individual training should follow or happen at the same time as the slide presentation since Soldiers may need detailed instruction. Soldiers should give individual demonstrations to ensure they are proficient in the training tasks. Throughout the process, when NCOs share personal experience, they enhance baseline training.

For example, when giving a slide presentation on land navigation, visual and verbal classroom learning can only go so far. To ensure Soldiers comprehend the material it is necessary to either run a land navigation course or use go/no-go criteria and checkpoint simulation in a hands-on training scenario. This identifies Soldiers who have a weaker understanding or who do not comprehend the course curriculum and need retraining. NCOs can enhance this training by giving personal examples and demonstrating how they used it in a combat environment.

The best way to pass on combat and tactical experience is, ironically, to lead from behind, but only after Soldiers understand the fundamentals and run through training scenarios with an NCO leading them. This is where you can truly communicate your experience to your Soldiers. By setting an example, they see what is right and what is effective. Then you know they experienced and participated in the proper way to execute and accomplish an objective. Then you can let them take charge, keeping them involved and engaged, so they develop the competencies needed to become effective leaders.

Let individual Soldiers lead a team and try to complete a mission. If they fail; great, because failure is the best teaching opportunity and they will remember their failure and push not to make the same mistakes. Afterward, discuss the reasons they failed to complete the objective and explain what you would have done and why.

I remember a personal experience as a specialist. It was my first time in charge, and I was responsible for a fire team during a squad live-fire exercise, and I had no idea how to lead them. I performed miserably, but I learned from my failure and was determined not to repeat the same mistakes. I paid more attention to what was needed and was successful in my next iteration.

At times, NCOs focus more on seeing things done right the first time or having them done their way. Allowing Soldiers to fail during training will give them the opportunity to come to the same conclusions you came to in combat, and they will understand your methods far better.

Failure during training can have positive benefits. It can force Soldiers to think outside the box in stressful situations but in a controlled and safe training environment, rather than outside the wire in a combat zone when lives on the line.

## Conclusion

NCOs must always strive to develop and mentor their Soldiers in their way because there can be shortcomings in institutional training. When NCOs recognize their Soldiers have differing backgrounds, learning capabilities, and education levels, they can train them in the most conducive way, whether it be visual, verbal, or hands-on. NCOs must know when to lead by example, when to let Soldiers demonstrate their leadership abilities, and when to let those Soldiers fail so they can learn from their mistakes.

Finally, NCOs must use all resources available to train their Soldiers to the best of their ability. This may mean using personal time to develop proper training plans. In the end, it is worth it, and your Soldiers will grow and learn to become better NCOs as a result. Our job as NCOs today is to train the competent NCOs of tomorrow. ■

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