Capitalizing on Human Dimension Enhances Combat Capabilities

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After the Vietnam War, the U.S. Army had a series of successful military combat operations, including Operation Urgent Fury, Operation Just Cause, Operation Desert Storm, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Military pundits, both friendly and unfriendly, attribute much of this success to the technological advantages the United States had over its enemies — in weaponry, modern equipment and cutting-edge intelligence-gathering capabilities — as well as to the diplomatic, political and military support of its close allies. However, insufficient attention has been given to the human dimension of the Army's structure, particularly the doctrinal manner in which it encourages initiative through the decentralization of power from the officers who plan its operations and command its formations to the noncommissioned officers who execute those plans in both garrison and combat.

The secret to the success of the Army is twofold. First is the manner in which it capitalizes on the

effective use of its most important resource — Soldiers. Second, and the focus of this article, is the manner in which the NCO Corps, promoted from the most talented members of the population of enlisted Soldiers, has developed during the past 40 years into a professional institution. The empowerment of NCOs during this period is now an indispensable feature of Army structure and culture that saves officers' precious resources — principally in freeing up their time to concentrate their attention on the management of vast and increasingly complex organizations. This creates efficiencies in the Army that effectively extend its operational and tactical reach — especially at the battalion level and below — by enabling each soldier to take initiative and resolve problems at the lowest level while achieving the commander's intent.

As partner nations look to plan, build and implement new security cooperation agreements during the future decades with the United States, it may be to their advantage to take a closer look at the pride of the Army — the NCO Corps — and the way it was developed after the Vietnam War to become the professional institution it is today.

Some traditional U.S. allies, such as Jordan and Colombia, have recently recognized the lack of an empowered NCO Corps as a shortfall within their own armies and are working with the United States to bring about systemic long-term changes to increase the autonomy of lower-level units within their own armed forces.[1] They are doing this by improving the leadership qualities in their NCOs and revamping their NCO education systems. This change can reap benefits by expanding the operational and tactical range of those armies.

The U.S. Army model

Toward the end of the Vietnam War, strategic leaders within the Army recognized that the conscripted force would soon be a relic of the past. The war-weary U.S. citizenry was tired of the draft and called for an all-volunteer force. Among the many initiatives Army leaders discussed to encourage enlistment and re-enlistment for the volunteer Soldiers were better pay, fair and improved opportunities for promotion and upward mobility, and a diffusion of power to enhance the capacity and effectiveness of the all-volunteer force. Officers in charge of implementing these changes, such as Gen. Eugene Depuy, spent several years perfecting the model that would eventually be adopted.

Depuy envisioned that this new model would be built around the squad leader, one of four primary subordinates of a platoon leader (the lowest organizational level of authority for officers).[2] The squad leader would be a staff sergeant, an NCO with a few years of experience as a sergeant or team leader. The span of control for the squad leader would remain eight to 11 Soldiers. The doctrinal difference would be the amount of power extended to the squad leader, as well as other NCOs in the Army. This newly empowered group of NCOs would be formally educated in the classroom and trained in tactical field environments using advanced tactics and new doctrine — with a heavy emphasis on leadership. In this manner, the Army would develop

NCOs who were fully capable of managing, leading and directing squads. In Depuy's words, the new NCO would be "a commander … at the smallest tactical level (squad) … just like an officer."[3]

By empowering these sergeants, and demanding they possess high-level leadership capabilities, the Army slowly developed a corps of professional NCOs over time. The NCO Corps created its own motto, proudly proclaiming that, "No one is more professional than I," which is a part of the NCO Creed. It declares that, "Officers of my unit will have maximum time to accomplish their duties; they will not have to accomplish mine."[4] NCOs took, and continue to take, great pride in performing the daily tasks that make an army function. These include accountability of personnel and equipment; equipment maintenance; and individual and team training on tasks such as marksmanship, first aid, patrolling, land navigation and radio communication procedures, to name just a few.

As the NCO Corps matured, the Army increased the responsibility of its NCOs, demanding that more senior NCOs mentor inexperienced officers. The senior NCOs were to provide a voice of skilled reason and to offer sound advice based on their years of accumulated professional knowledge. Soon, NCOs were also required to demonstrate a baseline competency by successfully performing standardized tasks, regardless of their particular specialty, during annual skill qualification testing, or common task training. Task difficulty and complexity increased with higher skill levels and grades. The Army also began introducing NCOs to future officers at the earliest opportunities in officer educational institutions, including the three commissioning sources: Reserve Officers' Training Corps programs, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and Officer Candidate School. The NCOs serving at these education sites demonstrated to the prospective lieutenants what their future subordinate squad leaders and other NCOs should be, know and do.

In the U.S. Army today, officers and NCOs are paired together at each level of command to form an efficient and effective command team. As a captain, an officer typically has the opportunity to command a company — his or her first command. This occurs at the seven- to 10-year mark of the officer's career. The officer is normally paired with a senior NCO, a first sergeant, who typically has between 17 and 22 years of professional experience. At battalion level and higher, commanders are paired with even more experienced senior NCOs: command sergeants major.

Over time, a unique and mutual trust has developed between officers and NCOs. Army NCOs indeed follow "the orders of the officers appointed over" them and, in fact, affirm their commitment to do so frequently in the oaths they take.[5] Officers, on the other hand, learn quickly to appreciate the experience and wisdom shared with them by seasoned NCOs, and they quickly learn to distinguish the poor-performing NCOs from the exceptional ones. An officer's responsibility includes applying pressure where it needs to be applied to motivate and elevate the abilities of those poor-performing NCOs; they are assisted in doing so by other NCOs. Conversely, oftentimes, seasoned professional NCOs can make up for the shortcomings of poorly performing

or inexperienced officers, tactfully assisting in the professional development of those officers while cushioning the negative effects of potentially poor junior officer leadership on their units.

In the end, what the Army has developed is a highly educated, all-volunteer enlisted force, capable of executing a wide variety of missions in accordance with the commander's intent in a decentralized manner. Led by career and mid-career professional NCOs, many with post-high-school degrees and other higher-education credentials, this potent force has yielded tremendous benefits for the U.S. Army.[6] Officers, supported by their NCOs in a team effort, have more time available to plan, coordinate, and synchronize garrison, training or combat events, as compared to their counterparts in similar armies without such a well-developed and self-aware NCO corps. Officers in those other armies often must personally manage numerous time-intensive tasks, which interferes with focusing on the next mission or critical leadership issue, and which would be regarded as NCO duties in the U.S. Army.

Decentralized execution

Employing the U.S. Army's mission command philosophy — decentralized execution — means a commander economizes time by only having to move within his or her command to where the commander's presence is most needed, where a conflict exists or a decision requires command authority.[7] Nevertheless, decentralizing exercise of power by delegating authority does not relieve the commander of any responsibility, nor does it drain the commander's power. On the contrary, it actually increases the commander's power and makes him or her accountable for even more, as many more macro- and micro-actions occur simultaneously in this decentralized model, often without the direct supervision of the officer. It remains incumbent upon the officer to follow up with his or her NCOs to ensure command guidance is being met. A well-worn adage in the Army is that "one can delegate authority, but never responsibility."

Though U.S. Army planning is largely centralized, with ample input from senior NCOs, execution is nearly always accomplished in a decentralized manner. This is especially true in combat environments, where young officers often rely on their squad leaders — who are, at many times, well beyond the officers' line of sight — to provide updates on the rapidly changing situations on the battlefield. Skillful officers use these extensions of their power to quickly transition phases of tactical operations, synchronize battle space with adjacent units and execute complicated tactical maneuvers at the small-unit level. The net effect is a thoroughly efficient organization that maximizes the use of all of its assets, especially its technically and tactically proficient NCO Corps, in a decentralized manner.

Today's NCOs pride themselves on being able to operate under duress with little or no supervision from officers to accomplish their units' missions. This gives officers the freedom to concentrate their own leadership skills and capabilities on more narrowly focused areas of concern where they need to be applied the most. Meanwhile, competent, dedicated and trusted

NCOs operate efficiently in their commands without officers' direct supervision — but following the direction of a widely disseminated commander's intent and within the realm of officer influence.

The recent defeat of the Iraqi army by Islamic state insurgents is a case of what can happen when all the decision-making is concentrated solely in the hands of senior leaders. Recent combat history shows much of the same style of hierarchical structure in the defeated armies from Operation Just Cause to Operation Iraqi Freedom. In each of these operations, the losing forces were configured with command structures that were centralized, unwieldy and inflexible.

While technological advantages cannot be discounted as a contributor to the U.S. Army's success, the inability of the enemies' professional enlisted corps (and junior officers) to take autonomous initiative was a debilitating factor that negatively affected enemy combat performance. Institutional decentralization of authority, if it had been fostered over time, could have made huge differences in the manner the various battles and operations played out in these conflicts. Given the rapid nature of modern-day combat, an army that is encumbered with poor tactical and operational agility, stemming from a lack of an empowered NCO corps, results in a clumsy and slow force that can quickly become outflanked, encircled and overwhelmed at all levels of command, from platoon to division. This was recently demonstrated in northern Iraq by Iraqi government forces with a weak and ill-trained NCO corps.

From the present doctrinal perspective of the U.S. Army, the more operations are decentralized, the more flexible and ingenuous the methodology that junior officers and their NCOs will use to overcome the obstacles they encounter to reach their objectives and complete their assigned missions.

Making changes

Nations and their armies that desire to develop a professional NCO corps similar to that of the U.S. Army must consider the following recommendations as they make that transition.

Add leadership training: Leadership training must be incorporated into all NCO training and education. While many armies, including those within our own hemisphere, have robust military academies for their officers that emphasize leadership and technical training through four or more rigorous years as a cadet, many of their professional enlisted educational academies train strictly on technical skills with little emphasis on leadership. These technical schools rarely elaborate on leadership principles, indoctrinate leadership abilities or encourage unilateral decision making to facilitate mission accomplishment. This lack of emphasis on junior leadership can handicap a platoon leader by having an entire platoon awaiting its officer's instructions without the willingness or ability to independently resolve problems within the scope of their own competencies in order to carry out the mission.

Change the pay system: As the U.S. Army realized after the Vietnam War, you eventually "reap

Change the pay system: As the U.S. Army realized after the Vietnam War, you eventually "reap what you sow." In order to attract quality recruits, the pay scale for enlisted personnel should at least be comparable to the civilian sector's wages. In nation-states that are postconscript, this can be a subject of great controversy and may create negative headlines in the national press. The United States faced similar problems after the Vietnam War when defense budgets were slashed. Nevertheless, restructuring defense spending methods is a matter of national priorities and is an important component of reform. Pay tables should also be configured in such a way that promotions are encouraged, earned and awarded with a monetary incentive. This goes along with the enhanced military prestige and increased levels of both authority and responsibility for the promoted NCO.

Transform the promotion system: A professional NCO corps requires a merit-based promotion system in which upward mobility is encouraged. This may require modifying the way NCOs are traditionally promoted in other countries. In many armies, career soldiers are compensated based exclusively on their time of military service. In contrast, while the U.S. Army also rewards for time in service, the rank and pay grade of each NCO is also determined based on that individual's merit. Over time, U.S. Army NCOs build individual profiles based on their job performances, which are evaluated for promotion by more senior NCOs and officers. Promotion boards for junior NCOs (corporal through staff sergeant) are decentralized and held locally, but promotion boards for senior NCOs (sergeant first class through sergeant major) are centralized and conducted annually.

Adapt the evaluation system: Assuming a desire to emulate such a merit system for promotion, the NCO evaluation system of a given army may need to be revamped as well. It should not only continue to evaluate technical skills, but it should also place a much greater emphasis on evaluating leadership — one that reflects the changing relationship between the NCO and the officer.

Empower the NCO support channel: In the U.S. Army, the chain of command is reinforced by the NCO support channel. The NCO support channel serves as a "backbone," supporting the officer's command positions and military authority. While this system is not necessarily required, it has certainly been effective for the U.S. Army and should be considered by those armies in other countries desiring to mold a professional NCO corps that works efficiently and effectively with their officers' corps.

Change the officer mind-set: A reforming army's officer corps may need to be entirely retrained as well. Many U.S. Army officers were resistant to what some perceived as a radical change in doctrine in the 1970s.[8] They mistakenly thought that empowering their subordinates would hollow out their own power base. This type of resistance can be expected in any army attempting to implement similar changes. However, with military orders mandating change, along with the support of senior and mid-grade officers who buy into the changes and possess the ability to foresee the long-term benefits of enforcing these improvements, this innovation will eventually be

foresee the long-term benefits of enforcing these improvements, this innovation will eventually be accepted and endorsed.

The benefits and ground rules must be explained thoroughly to the entire officer corps — from cadets to general officers. Benefits from NCO empowerment can include, for example, improved logistical support, equipment maintenance and personnel accountability. Additionally, delegation of authority to NCOs for conducting individual and small-unit collective training without constant direct supervision saves officers time and eliminates duplication of efforts. Empowering and trusting NCOs with these responsibilities greatly increases small-unit cohesion, morale, and technical and tactical proficiency.

Improve the personnel management system: Finally, improvements must be made to enlisted personnel management systems in changing armies. Many armies have not invested deeply in their enlisted personnel management systems, which may make the creation of a competitive centralized promotion board and a professional career track for NCOs difficult. Having gone through the evolutionary process of establishing an enlisted personnel management system initially in the 1970s, the U.S. Army is still in the process of modifying its own system. For example, it is currently streamlining its personnel system and minimizing the differences between the way NCO and officer records are managed.

Conclusion

Although the human dimension alone does not fully explain the success of the U.S. Army, it is often underappreciated as the foundation upon which the Army is built. Recognizing this frequent omission, the U.S. Army celebrated the “Year of the NCO” in 2009, acknowledging the critical contributions of its career enlisted Soldiers.[9] While media headlines related to the military consistently mention general officers, much of what actually happens within the U.S. Army is attributable to its structure and its effective employment of its human dimension resource — specifically, its NCOs and enlisted Soldiers. The proof lies not only in the U.S. Army’s successes but also in its sacrifices. Of the 18 Soldiers awarded the Medal of Honor (the highest medal for valor presented by the United States) in the post-Vietnam War era, 16 were enlisted.[10]

There are no magic bullets, weapons platforms, defense alliances, communications systems or any other advanced technologies that can replace solid leadership. By pushing power both down and out to expand the influence of competent leadership to its lowest organizational levels, encouraging the upward mobility of its greatest resource — its volunteer force — and demanding successful results, the U.S. Army has set a shining example of how to effectively utilize Soldiers, especially career NCOs, to the maximum extent of their abilities. Other advantages are important but not nearly as critical. Partner nations of the United States should look internally, within their own armies, and analyze if they are leveraging their own enlisted corps to the maximum extent of their capabilities. It is an affordable military solution well-worth exploring.

Notes

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2. Ernest F. Fisher, *Guardians of the Republic: A History of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps of the U.S. Army* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), page 394.
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4. U.S. Army website, “NCO Creed,” accessed 14 July 2015, http://www.army.mil/values/nco.html.
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8. Fisher, 392.
9. Army News Service, “Army Leaders Kick off Year of the NCO at Texas Installation” accessed 14 July 2015, http://www.army.mil/article/15567/army-leaders-kick-off-year-of-nco-at-texas-installation/.
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