



"Hip-Pocket" or opportunity training has a long history as a leadership tool within the ranks. Resourceful noncommissioned officers can utilize such informal training methods along with guided discussions as a way to build relationships with their Soldiers, and to maintain and improve their proficiency with mission essential tasks. (Graphic by Dayton Ward, NCO Journal)

Hip-Pocket Training, Guided Discussions

Time-Tested NCO Tools

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A hallmark of Army noncommissioned officers is the responsibility they carry to train and mentor junior Soldiers. Empowered by their leadership, NCOs ensure the accomplishment of mission essential tasks and maintaining technical and tactical competencies. Institutional and unit programs for specific military occupational specialties are the primary contributors to these ongoing training needs, along with instruction in subjects applicable to all Soldiers regardless of MOS.

Additionally, hip-pocket training and guided discussions are also available. Innovative NCOs can employ

these methods to assist their Soldiers in a "hands-on" manner and contribute to the sustained proficiency of essential knowledge and skills.

Hip-Pocket Training

Consisting of brief, informal periods of instruction employed by small unit leaders to take advantage of any unscheduled time between assignments or other tasks, "hip-pocket training" has a long history as a leadership tool for NCOs. It is a time-tested method used to reinforce proficiencies linked to a unit's Mission Essential

Task List as well as address perceived deficiencies. For the individual leader, it is an excellent way to "exercise initiative in the absence of orders" in the finest tradition of the NCO Creed.¹

It is important to note the distinction between this type of training and the long-standing tradition of "sergeant's time," in which NCOs take charge of developing and providing blocks of formal, scheduled instruction with an emphasis on individual and small-unit collective tasks.² However, NCOs will note the parallels between the two methods of training and how both are useful leadership tools.

In its purest form, hip-pocket training has no real limitations on topics or formats of instruction. Such training can address subjects that do not necessarily have any direct correlation to a unit's METL, which can typically fall into the categories of initial training, refresher training, or sustainment training. For these reasons, there was some concern that hip-pocket instruction, with its informal approach and lack of proper oversight and focus, might even be perceived as detrimental to unit training goals.³

The Army, to better define the expectations for such training while still allowing leaders latitude as to its conduct, officially codified the use of hip-pocket or "opportunity training" as a complement to a unit's formal training program. This explanation included outlining the parameters for employing this type of instruction with the greatest degree of effectiveness. As originally defined in February 2004 with the publication of Army Field Manual 7-21.13, *The Soldier's Guide*, opportunity training is:

"...the conduct of pre-selected, prepared instruction on critical tasks that require little explanation. Sometimes called "hip-pocket" training, it is conducted when proficiency has been reached on the scheduled primary training task and time is available. Unscheduled breaks in exercises or assembly area operations, or while waiting for transportation, provide time for opportunity training."⁴

As opposed to hip-pocket training, which can be less restrictive concerning topic selection, opportunity training is intended to work in step with a unit's established training priorities and schedule. Instruction offered in this manner, approved by higher unit leadership, and is developed and implemented in support of the unit's METL.

Even with these parameters, there remains plenty of flexibility and opportunity for creative NCOs to exercise initiative while selecting and developing training topics for their Soldiers. Leaders can concentrate on tasks, which are consistent with a unit's training needs. This coordination also ensures that these shorter, less formal instruction periods provide the proper emphasis on maintaining a unit's mission-critical skills.

The Army continues to recognize the need for leaders to utilize hip-pocket training. Published in October 2016, FM 7-0, *Train to Win in a Complex World*, is the latest word on Army training doctrine at all levels of the operational force.⁵ Included in the manual is a renewed acknowledgment of the value hip-pocket training represents within the broader scope of a unit's regular training cycle:

"Hip-pocket training usually consists of individual tasks on which the unit can train when it experiences inactive periods during scheduled training. Ideally, leaders train these selected tasks in 15 to 30 minutes since more time may not be available. It is another technique for managing sustainment training."⁶

Within the framework provided by FM 7-0, NCOs are encouraged to identify training needs conducive to shorter periods of informal instruction, based on task lists approved by unit commanders. They develop solutions along with the appropriate training materials to make the best use of opportunities that present themselves during blocks of unscheduled time.

As further highlighted in FM 7-0, hip-pocket training that aligns with a unit's training schedule and mission essential proficiencies allows leaders a means of building confidence in their ability to teach their Soldiers.⁷ NCOs can also utilize these methods to mentor junior Soldiers in the improvement of their training and teaching skills, supervising the selection and development of topics which can be shared in this manner while maintaining mission focus.

Guided Discussions

In academic circles, the guided discussion typically comprises a conversation within a small group, during which the group's leader or facilitator asks pre-planned questions designed to elicit responses and further questions from the discussion participants.⁸ In these situations, the group leader has usually anticipated the answers most likely to be offered for each question and prepared supplemental comments or other points to be shared with the group to enhance debate before moving on to the next question or topic.⁹

The military community applies the same approach, and leaders can employ guided discussions as a means of conversing with subordinates on a wide range of topics. This informal method of interaction with Soldiers is just one conduit through which leaders can impart information and receive feedback in an environment that provokes thoughtful conversation and idea sharing.

Guided discussions can play a central role in professional development in the technical and tactical arenas, such as reviewing operations and after action reports or conducting other post-mission activities.¹⁰ They can be used to underscore training on issues pertinent to Army and unit policies. Conversations revolving around mor-

al or ethical questions are frequent discussion topics, with the guided format commonly used as a means of reinforcing a service branch's core values. This practice is particularly true in the Marine Corps and the Army.¹¹ The format's informal nature affords Soldiers the opportunity to seek clarification or voice concerns, which can foster dialogue about challenges or issues that impact morale and welfare and, ultimately, unit readiness.

Within the realm of professional military education, Sgt. Maj. of the Army Daniel A. Dailey encourages the use of guided discussions. His Book Club is a prime example of his interest in this arena and its usefulness to NCOs, as it "is designed to provide junior leaders guided opportunities to engage with their Soldiers on Army profession concepts."¹² The reading list includes study guides designed to assist leaders in facilitating discussion and encourage Soldiers to exchange thoughts and ideas about the books he selects. To read book reviews of the SMA's selections, click on the corresponding titles: Ender's Game and Start with Why.

Additionally, the Army Career Tracker website, launched in 2009 and given a massive overhaul in 2016, includes reading lists with titles appropriate to specific MOSs.¹³ These reading lists and the role they play in Soldiers' ongoing professional development are excellent springboards for guided discussions.

Regardless of the topic, guided discussions allow NCOs to lead conversations, pose questions that stimulate creative thinking and thoughtful analysis, and ensure understanding.

Conclusion

When used to complement unit training needs, hip-pocket training and guided discussions are tools that NCOs can employ to strengthen relationships with their Soldiers. These methods provide leaders with opportunities to monitor their Soldiers' abilities and maintain their unit task proficiencies in a direct manner, which can enhance unit cohesion and drive mission success. ■

Notes

1. U.S. Army, "The NCO Creed," U.S. Army official website, accessed January 22, 2018, <https://www.army.mil/values/nco.html>.

2. Kevin Lilley and Michelle Tan, "Sergeant's Time is Making a Comeback in the Army," Army Times website, December 14, 2015, accessed January 22, 2018, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2015/12/14/sergeant-s-time-is-making-a-comeback-in-the-army/>.

3. Sgt. Maj. Paul W. Reynolds, "One Soldier's Notion of Opportunity Training," NCO Journal Vol. 4 Issue 4, Fall 1994, <https://www.dvidshub.net/publication/issues/28278>.

4. U.S. Army, The Soldier's Guide, FM 7-21.13 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, February 2, 2004, inactive), para 5-84.

5. David Vergun, "New Field Manual Can Help NCOs 'Train to Win in a Complex World'," NCO Journal website, October 18, 2016, accessed January 22, 2018, <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2016/October/New-Field-Manual/>.

6. U.S. Army, Training to Win in a Complex World, FM 7-0 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, October 5, 2016),

para C-43.

7. U.S. Army, Training to Win in a Complex World.

8. Donald V. McCain & Deborah D. Tobey, Facilitation Skills Training (ASTD Press, 2007), Handout 6-9.

9. Donald V. McCain & Deborah D. Tobey, Facilitation Skills Training.

10. Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, "Facilitator Best Practices," CAPE website, accessed January 23, 2008, <http://cape.army.mil/facilitator.php>.

11. Dick Couch, A Tactical Ethic: Moral Conduct in the Insurgent Battlespace (Naval Institute Press, 2010), 45.

12. Sgt. Maj. of the Army Daniel A. Dailey's Book Club, CAPE website, accessed January 23, 2018, <http://cape.army.mil/library/sma-book-club/>.

13. Michelle Tan, "Redesigned Army Career Tracker Helps Soldiers More Easily Map, Manage Their Careers," Army Times website, June 9, 2016, accessed April 3, 2018, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2016/06/09/redesigned-army-career-tracker-helps-soldiers-more-easily-map-manage-their-careers/>.



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