

# Sergeants Are Not Crusaders

By Sgt. Sam White

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Sergeant Major of the Army Dan Dailey promotes a junior enlisted soldier during a visit to U.S. Army Africa. A new Army directive aims to make sure the most qualified soldiers are given the opportunity to advance their careers. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Lance Pounds)

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It was during the last week of my Primary Leadership Development Course that I was promoted to sergeant. At the morning formation, the first sergeant pinned the stripes on my uniform. He shook my hand and smiled at me. That smile puzzled me.

It was the most remarkable smile I had ever seen on the face of a first shirt. It was an "atta boy" smile or an "I've got you now" smile.

Frankly, when he pinned those stripes on me, I had little idea of what being a noncommissioned officer was all about. It was much later that I realized what the first sergeant's smile really said.

For me, moving up in grade meant a little better life for my wife and kids. Filling up a couple of carts at the commissary wouldn't hurt much.

I thought being a sergeant was going to make my life easier.

I thought those stripes gave me the authority to right that long list of wrongs that needed attention back in my section.

I also thought I'd get a little more respect from those deadbeat privates and specialists back at the office. But when I returned, I found that they were ready for me. They knew me better than I had thought. They said that becoming a sergeant would go straight to my head.

It wasn't long before this pumped-up new attitude alienated me from practically everyone in the office. It got to the point where they would go out of their way to disobey me. I used what disciplinary measures I could to get back at them. That certainly didn't help my credibility with my people.

My troubles really started to compound when the senior NCOs from "upstairs" started to delegate some additional duties to me. They were

standard NCO jobs, nothing extraordinary. But the hole I'd dug with my soldiers just got deeper when I tried to follow my orders.

Finally, my supervisor sat me down.

You're a good soldier. You know your job," he said. "But you've set some incredibly high standards for yourself. You can't expect to meet them all the time, and you certainly can't expect your soldiers to meet them.

"Take it easy on yourself and your soldiers. Lead, don't push," he said.

Slowly, the things I had learned in PLDC came back to me. I started to watch and copy good NCOs - sergeants who both got things done and got along with their subordinates.

I realized what I was doing was confusing authority with responsibility. My job as an NCO wasn't to boss people around. My job was to take care of them.

I found I accomplished things better when I listened to what my soldiers had to say and I helped them to the best of my ability when they needed me. NCOs don't necessarily have to be friends to subordinates, but they must care for them.

There are many terms you can use to describe what makes a good NCO. The best NCOs are good leaders, good teachers, good counselors and good organizers. But above all, I feel the Army's top NCOs are enablers. They recognize what their people need to accomplish their mission, then they do everything they can to see that those needs are met.

Good NCOs empower their subordinates to excel.

Now I realize what was behind that first sergeant's grin. It was a smile full of respect. I think it said, "Welcome. You've just entered a time-honored institution, the NCO Corps."

Trying to become a good NCO is hard work, and it hasn't necessarily made my life easier, but it sure has made it better.