

Thoughts on the Basics of Direct Leadership at the Platoon and Squad Level

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While serving as members of Soldier/NCO of the Month and promotion boards, my platoon sergeants and I noticed a knowledge gap regarding what a noncommissioned officer is and does. Questions such as, “How often should a team leader inspect his Soldiers’ rooms?” received a wide range of answers, although most of the answers seemed to be “weekly.” Focused questions regarding Physical Readiness Training, Troop Leading Procedures, Mission Command and even daily duties of the NCO seemed to yield a variety of responses. It was obvious that the answers were either incorrect or memorized. My platoon sergeants and I discussed the results of the board, then began to scrutinize our infantry troop (part of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment, “Dragoons”).

While discussing our knowledge gaps and shortfalls with our squad and team leaders, we identified a need to begin a series of Leader Professional Development classes that target basic duties and responsibilities, a series with a strong theme. We decided to focus on, “What are the powers of the NCO and how does the responsibility inherent in those powers impact the NCO?” It is all well and good to give orders and “be in charge,” but what are the consequences of poor performance? Does one NCO’s lack of performance have a real impact on the rest of the corps? Beginning with a discussion of Physical Readiness Training (PRT), this series will address specific duties and then expand on how those responsibilities play out in our daily lives.

We begin with a caveat: Though a deep knowledge and understanding of publications and TTPs — as well as general competence — is the minimum expected from our NCOs, we also acknowledge that training happens at different paces in different places. Any NCO worth his or her stripes can quote the Army’s definition of the purpose of leadership: “The process of providing purpose, direction and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.” TC 7-22.7 lists 11 duties of NCOs on page 5-4. There is myriad guidance between the Training Circulars and ADP 6-22. This paper seeks to provide an easy reference for some of the points made. It is not reasonable to expect every staff sergeant to have read and understood every applicable publication, but it is certainly reasonable to expect leaders to provide classes and training on relevant publications.

What is it an NCO should do?

“Lead” is an overly simplistic answer, and so is “train.” We all know that NCOs lead physical training in the morning, but we seldom take the time to analyze that responsibility. Physical Training (PT) requires that NCOs both lead and train. The following is a discussion on what “leading” and

“training” mean with regard to PT. We argue that daily PT sessions require both leading and training in strict accordance with ADP and ADRP 7-0, complete with rehearsals, trainer certification and After-Action Reviews (AARs). Anything less is a missed training opportunity and a failed (though not career-ending) leadership moment.

Officers do not lead the conduct of PT. They prioritize it, block off time on the training calendar, provide a direction and a vision, but do not lead PT. NCOs *should* treat PT like every other training event and apply the eight-step training model or Troop Leading Procedures (TLPs).[1] More importantly, however, is that we seldom observe squad or team leaders conduct regular TLPs for physical training. The conduct of physical training is often taken for granted, although an exceptional unit will have a PT calendar posted and discussed at weekly training meetings. Regardless of published calendars, NCOs who lead PT often do not lead to the training standard, even though they know, or certainly should know, the standards.

In our experience, very few NCOs use TLPs for PT. Why do so few team and squad leaders routinely apply the TLP to a daily training event? In a word, assumptions. We incorrectly make a number of assumptions about both our own and our subordinates’ abilities and knowledge. It is easy to assume that our Soldiers, team leaders and squad leaders are thoroughly proficient on the PRT’s conditioning drill, although a simple test of their knowledge will most likely show they do not even know those drills in sequence, or that they may not be able to name each of the 10 drills at all. Though there is a strong argument to be made that many of our leaders have also failed to embrace FM 7-22’s guidance, the core of the problem remains that leaders make incorrect assumptions regarding their abilities.

Fixing incorrect assumptions is not a simple task. First, leaders must acknowledge they have made incorrect assumptions. Second, they must agree that correcting their assumptions is a valid and meaningful task. Next, there must be a leader with the commitment and knowledge who can provide the training necessary to correct the deficiency. It does not take much to assume that every company-sized element in the Army has quite a few knowledgeable and committed leaders – and it is certain that the vast majority of leaders often correct improper assumptions.

There are four basic assumptions regarding physical training that are all too often incorrect. This list should not be seen to be exclusive, nor should it be seen to be demeaning. We experience these assumptions in an excellent troop; there are no reasons to believe our experiences are unique or display gross incompetence. Solving problems is at the heart of the NCO Corps; identifying problems is our first step. These are common misconceptions regarding the PRT that we have found in our troop.

1. Soldiers are entirely familiar with and capable of performing PRT to standard.
2. PRT is not a good enough program to produce highly fit and ready Soldiers.
3. The individual leader can create a better physical fitness program than PRT.
4. Checking the block is good enough to accomplish the intent of PRT.

Looking at these assumptions individually, we can see a number of embarrassing fallacies. Looking closer and replacing PRT with any other form of training, we may even begin to see a pattern emerging. These assumptions are not necessarily unique to how we look at PRT. As we examine these assumptions, we may find that they apply equally to other training events. We encourage reading this list twice, thinking closely about other training events the second time.

1. “Soldiers are entirely familiar with and capable of performing PRT to standard”

As pointed out earlier, no, they are not. Again, this is an easy metric to test. FM 7-22 is a straight-forward manual, although it seems that we are hard-pressed to find many leaders who have taken the time to read through this important publication. It is unrealistic to expect our Soldiers to be familiar with and capable of performing PRT to standard if our leaders do not have a solid understanding of the PRT manual. It is always the responsibility of the NCO Corps to train Soldiers, and training requires a deep understanding of the subject material. We are comfortable accepting a long learning curve in our own troop as our NCOs begin to master the fundamentals of PRT. Unfamiliarity should not be the defining hindrance to the incorporation of PRT. Rather it should be the goad we use to improve ourselves and our units. For classes and online instruction, www.atn.army.mil (<http://www.atn.army.mil/>) offers a complete training program for leaders.

2. “PRT is not a good enough program to produce highly fit and ready Soldiers”

“Soldiers trained through PRT demonstrate the mobility to apply strength and endurance to the performance of basic military skills such as marching, speed running, jumping, vaulting, climbing, crawling, combatives and water survival,” according to FM 7-22. Until a leader is intimately familiar with, and has extensively implemented, the entire manual, that leader does not have a rational argument against using PRT to produce highly fit and ready Soldiers.

Further, PRT is Army law, proscribed in AR 350-1. The doctrine found in FM 7-22 is representative of our profession of arms. Our leaders have a basic expectation that NCOs will comply with both regulations and doctrine. Leading requires the maturity to follow orders and intent beyond what one expects from one’s subordinates. Very few leaders will tolerate Soldiers making excuses for failing to follow orders and guidance; we must avoid being leaders who excuse in ourselves what we refuse to accept in others.

3. “The individual leader can create a better physical fitness program than PRT”

This assumption may or may not be verbalized by the individual leader, but this is also easy to test. A simple observation during PT hours will

summe to inform whether the leader is using FM 7-22 or is using their own version of training. There are two simple points here. First, if a leader can produce a better program than the PRT, where is that program? Second, does the leader have a comprehensive program that accounts for Soldiers' varying levels of readiness while simultaneously tying into the training calendar? It is highly doubtful that any other physical training program has so thoroughly tied itself to the warrior tasks and battle drills or taken into account the nature of Army training. PRT addresses each of the seven principles of training, and it is unlikely that any training regimen produced by any external source could address Army doctrine so closely. We do not claim that there are no other physical fitness routines that will fit the bill, but referring to our argument's assumption two, we would be hard pressed to find many subordinate NCOs who are thoroughly familiar with both the PRT and another physical fitness program.

4. "Checking the block is good enough to accomplish the intent of PRT"

Obviously, no training program that does not include involved leaders who follow the Troop Leading Procedure will accomplish that program's intent. Many NCOs who understand that FM 7-22 is doctrine will begin their morning with the preparation drill and end with the recovery drill, but will not follow PRT during the PT session itself. Lip service to doctrine is a disservice to the Soldiers and the NCO. A second point here is that many times our subordinate leaders assume that their leaders will correct them if they are wrong. Unfortunately, that assumption is all too often incorrect.

Clearly, PRT is a viable and robust program with the capability to produce physically fit Soldiers. Clearly, it is the responsibility of the NCO Corps to lead PRT with intelligence and discipline. However, it is our experience that PRT is not the Army standard that it should be, and we hope to use the insights in this article to energize team and squad leaders to familiarize themselves with FM 7-22 and incorporate those principles and exercises during daily PT, rather than half-stepping their way through working out or using outdated exercises that have been shown to have negative effects. An NCO's strength comes from his or her knowledge, skills and attributes; leading PT correctly and applying the TLPs appropriately will only strengthen our Soldiers and our NCO Corps.

Discussion points

Bring these questions up with your peers and leaders. Post your insights on the bottom of this article or on the NCO Journal's Facebook or Twitter page.

Do the four assumptions apply as equally to other training events? For example, do they apply to preliminary marksmanship instruction or any other task an organization does routinely?

1. Would enforcing the application of the TLP process for PRT have a beneficial impact on other training events? (Is the juice worth the squeeze?)
2. Should daily PRT events have a priority at company training meetings? Who is the best person to answer this question?
3. All training involves AARs. Is an AAR necessary or even desirable after every PT session?
4. Do these assumptions hold true in other training events? i.e.:

- a. Soldiers are entirely familiar with and capable of performing *TRAINING EVENT* to standard.
- b. *TRAINING EVENT* is not a good enough program to produce highly fit and ready Soldiers.
- c. The individual leader can create a better plan than *TRAINING EVENT*.
- d. Checking the block is good enough to accomplish the intent of *TRAINING EVENT*.

Easy reference list

ADP (http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/adp6_22.pdf) and ADRP 6-22 (http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/adrp6_22.pdf), Army Leadership: http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/adrp6_22.pdf

ADP (http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/adp7_0.pdf#page=1&zoom=auto,-174,667) and ADRP 7-0 (http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/adrp7_0.pdf), Training Units and Developing Leaders: http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/adrp7_0.pdf

FM 7-22, Physical Readiness Training (http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/fm7_22.pdf): http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/fm7_22.pdf

TC 7-22.7, Noncommissioned Officer Guide (http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/tc7_22x7.pdf): http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/tc7_22x7.pdf

Online PRT training, planning and other resources available at <https://atn.army.mil/> (https://atn.army.mil/dsp_template.aspx?dpID=127)

Army PRT app available on Google Play and the iTunes store

Bonus thought

"Old school": We have all heard this nebulous phrase, typically used in a derogatory comment about how discipline issues are being handled. "My old platoon sergeant was old school and would have smoked that Soldier until he puked." Soldiers use this phrase regardless of their time in service or knowledge of how issues were resolved in "old school" times. I have heard specialists with less than two years of service use this phrase as often as staff sergeants with eight years in the infantry, none of whom were even born when the Gulf War was ending. "Old school" is a

phrase with as little use as "common sense," which is more of an egotistical statement about one's limited knowledge than it is a true base of knowledge.

[1] It is important to note that ADRP 7-0 points out "Training models, such as the 8-step training model, are only guides and not lock-step processes. They can be useful, but they are effectively just modifications of either the MDMP or TLP" (2012, p. 3-10).