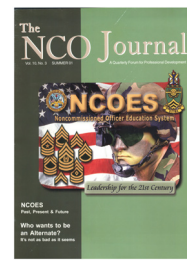


School of Hard Knocks

By Sgt. 1st Class William W. Applegarth

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Noncommissioned officers cannot thrive on NCOES alone to become leaders of Soldiers. Although formal and traditional education has its place, the true final exam for NCOs is on the battlefield. Nothing is more valuable than good old-fashioned experience. By combining the two, our NCOs will be better leaders on exam day.

The noncommissioned officer (NCO) has been a part of the Army of the United States of America since its inception and has recruited, trained, led and cared for Soldiers since those humble beginnings. An NCO is a leader whether one is a corporal or the Sergeant Major of the Army and must accept and fill this role to the best of his or her abilities.

One way to ensure that today's Soldiers are getting the leadership they deserve is through the Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES).

Today's NCO Corps is the product of its members, both past and present. The Corps, with its professional Soldiers and leaders, has implemented leadership development schools from the Primary Leadership Development Course (PLDC) through the Sergeants Major Course.

These courses, while important training tools, are often seen as little more than a rite of passage or a hurdle to be overcome in the pursuit of the next rank and pay raise.

Senior NCOs must ensure that those personnel instructing and attending these courses understand that the material taught is a cornerstone of tomorrow's Army leadership, not merely an inconvenience.

While the formal NCOES is a vital ingredient in the development of NCOs, there is a second equally important part, known colloquially as "HK University," or the school of "Hard Knocks."

No traditional education will prepare tomorrow's NCO Corps for the challenges of leadership as well as personal experience.

In order to provide our future NCO with the tools to succeed and mature, we, the NCOs of today, must be willing to mentor and educate those Soldiers under our charge.

Basic leadership skills including planning and executing training, drill and ceremony and counseling taught during early NCOES courses should be tempered with experience.

Soldiers being considered for promotion to NCO ranks must be exposed to the responsibilities of leadership at the unit level prior to attendance at NCOES courses.

Having these future NCOs plan, conduct and evaluate training on a regular basis with appropriate guidance and counseling from more experienced NCOs will prove invaluable to the Soldier at NCOES schools.

Any Soldier can be placed in leadership positions during regular workday activities, as well as during field exercises and Army Training and Evaluation Programs (ARTEPs).

Encourage junior-enlisted members to assume leadership roles in their daily activities, including drill and ceremony practice and conducting Physical Training. Asking them to accept responsibility for formal classes will grant these future NCOs valuable experience.

The experience gained via this training will greatly enhance Soldiers' skills in leadership, time and resource management, oral and written communication and research abilities.

These areas are generally weighed heavily in service schools (including NCOES courses) and are evaluated on the DA 1059, Service School Academic Evaluation Report. A perfect time for observing the future NCO as a leader is during unit "Sergeant's Time" training.

As junior NCOs progress in rank, senior NCOs must be prepared to challenge them with increasing degrees of responsibility.

The NCO Corps must use all tools available to develop our junior enlisted members professionally. Preparations for these training sessions will differ with each situation.

Leadership training sessions must be challenging but should not expose the Soldier to situations that he or she cannot manage.

In the event that an unmanageable situation arises during leader training, a more senior NCO must be prepared to step in and regain "equilibrium" or control the situation.

In the beginning, senior NCOs may have to resort to the "task, don't ask" method when instituting training for tomorrow's leaders.

Soldiers must be made to take responsibility and to take an active role in preparing and conducting training.

Junior-enlisted members will quickly develop new and diverse methods of training if given the opportunity.

This will often rejuvenate “stale” Common Task training, which has long been a mainstay of “Sergeants’ Time” and “hip pocket” training.

With appropriate training and counseling, junior NCOs and enlisted will actively seek the opportunity to lead training.

Encourage Soldiers to develop personally and professionally through military and civilian education as well as formal NCOES courses.

As leaders, it is incumbent upon members of the NCO Corps to challenge our Soldiers to higher standards, higher education and higher levels of responsibility.

By allowing our Soldiers to become complacent and to accept the status quo we, the professional NCO Corps, do our Army a grave injustice.

The Army has a wide variety of courses, generally taught locally, with fairly lenient attendance fills.

The NCO chain of concern must be willing to allow the best and brightest among our developing junior enlisted to grow professionally through service schools, even if it means ultimately losing those Soldiers to another command.

Upon completion of courses, request, encourage or require attendees to act as subject-matter experts, instilling a desire to prepare others for training, to hone their abilities as instructors and to mature as future leaders. It is the senior NCO’s responsibility to instill in today’s Soldier the desire to lead by example.

In today’s Army, it is often difficult to impart to our junior Soldiers the importance of professional development.

By instilling the desire to lead others, we, the NCO Corps, are guaranteeing that tomorrow’s Army will be wor-



A student wearing a gas mask and Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System (MILES) gear runs through the woods with an M-60 machin gun during a Primary Leadership Development Course assault exercise at Fort Lewis, Washington. (U.S. Army photo by Daniel T. Wright)

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Today’s Soldiers need to understand that insignia of rank, skill badges, berets and other accouterments do not make an NCO special.

It is the NCO who makes these items special because of the knowledge, experience, technical proficiency and leadership skills these items denote.

This knowledge, technical and tactical proficiency, and leadership can only come from a mix of formal Noncommissioned Officer Education System courses and experience.

By combining the Army’s formal NCOES and “education through experience” today’s NCO Corps virtually guarantees that future noncommissioned officers will be

prepared to face the challenges of the future, regardless of the nature of those challenges. ■

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