U.S. Army Soldiers with 325th Brigade Support Battalion, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division partnered with Share Our Savior Hawaii and volunteered during a food distribution at Ewa Beach, Hawaii, July 28, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by 1st Lt. Angelo Mejia)

# Evaluating Character

*By Sgt. Maj. Demetris A. Prewitt*

513th Military Intelligence Brigade

Preparing for the future fight is more than just adapting doctrine and creating training schedules. There are a range of issues that affect U.S. Army readiness such as sexual assault, harassment, racial and gender discrimination, suicide, domestic violence, and others. However, by encouraging moral and ethical behavior in noncommissioned officers (NCOs), it can positively change the character of the NCO Corps. This can be done by changing how the Army utilizes the NCO Evaluation Report (NCOER). This article examines the Army's emphasis on character, describes how the Army can shape the character of NCOs individually through the NCOER, discusses methods to assess and evaluate character, addresses objections to the change, and provides steps for implementing a four-box check system for the character block on the NCOER.

## Current State of the NCOER

The Department of the Army (DA) left a gap in character evaluations on the 2015 update to the NCOER. On the latest *DA Form 2166-9-2 NCO Evaluation Report (SSG-1SG/MSG)*, five of the six leadership requirements received an updated four-box check system; however, the character block retained the binary check system from the previous form. This leaves the Army with a substandard means to evaluate its most important leadership requirement—*character*—beyond the basic "Met Standard." This lack of evaluation doesn't allow Soldiers room for personal growth or improvement. Therefore, on *DA Form 2166-9-2* and *DA Form 2166-9-3*, the Army must adopt a four-box check system for character leadership to align the emphasis on individual character with the evaluation of NCOs.
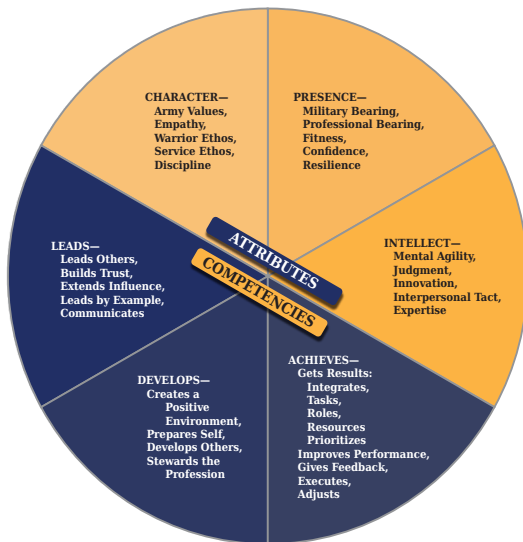
Figure 1 - Army Leadership Requirements Model. (Center for Army Leadership, n.d.)

## Emphasis on Character

Character is a focus point among Army leadership requirements (see Figure 1). Through character, leaders are able to build trust with their subordinates, an essential component to mission command, especially in large-scale combat operations (Department of the Army, 2019a). The Army's Framework for character development states, "Successful character development contributes to cohesive teamwork and mutual trust—the first principle of mission command" (Department of the Army, 2017a, p. 8).

### Character as the Foremost Leadership Requirement

According to *Army Doctrine Publication* (ADP) *6-22: Army Leadership and the Profession*, "Embracing the Army Values is the hallmark of being an Army professional" (Department of the Army, 2019b, p. 2-2). This assertion, along with *Army Regulation* (AR) *623-3: Evaluation Reporting System* (ERS), implies that character is the foremost leadership requirement:

> ❝The Army Values, empathy, warrior ethos, and discipline are critical attributes that define a leader's character and apply across all grades, positions, branches, and specialties. These attributes are critical to maintain public trust and confidence in the Army and the qualities of leadership and management needed to maintain an effective NCO Corps. (Department of the Army, 2019c, p. 41)❞

### Character at the Forefront of the Army's Leader Development Strategy

The Army Leader Development Strategy (ALDS) is synonymous with the Army's Framework for Character

Development (CAPL, 2018b). Given the Army's focus on character and its desire for the ERS to be an accurate and effective assessment tool, why do the other leadership requirements on the NCOER have a more detailed box check system (Department of the Army, 2019c)? To develop well-rounded leaders, the Army should have the same box check system for each leadership requirement on the NCOER. Making this change would encourage NCOs to focus on their character by making ethically-sound choices benefiting their unit and community, which would improve the Army as a whole.

## Assessing Character – Exceeded and Far Exceeded Standards

A study conducted by DecisionWise's Leadership Intelligence technology platform found a person's disposition is the most difficult area for a leader to coach and has the highest potential for resistance from subordinates. The term *disposition* includes one's values, beliefs, personal characteristics, and attitude (Rogel, 2012). This definition corresponds to the Army leadership requirement of character: Army Values, empathy, discipline, and humility (Department of the Army, 2019b). Therefore, when counseling character, leaders must use self-awareness and emotional intelligence.

### Understanding Character

When assessing someone's character, psychologists Helzer and Critcher (2018) state, "outwardly-observed behavior alone is insufficient…for evaluating character" (p. 4). Therefore, when assessing character, it is important to understand character is both a set of demonstrable qualities and an abstract concept. This corresponds to the Army's two aspects of character – *operational character* and *intrinsic character*. Operational character "can be observed through our consistent and faithful adherence to the Army Ethic, including Army Values, in our decisions and actions" (Center for the Army Profession and Leadership [CAPL], 2018a, p. 5). Intrinsic character refers to "identity, sense of purpose, values, virtues, morals, and conscience" (CAPL, 2018a, p. 5). The rater must consider both forms of character when evaluating an NCO.

Examples of operational character include mission perseverance, acts of personal courage, a sense of responsibility and accountability, adherence to Army command policy, and the administration of discipline and military justice. Intrinsic character includes humility, respect for authority, patience, self-control, discipline, empathy, positivity, valuing diversity and inclusion, and having a genuine concern for the well-being of Soldiers and their families.

### Exceeding and Far Exceeding the Standard in Character

A way to establish the grounds for exceeding and far exceeding the standard in character is to use acts, facts, quantifiable data, and specific events – just like the other areas of the NCOER. Under the current system, the

requirement for a Soldier to receive a "Met Standard" in character is going through the rating period without any Sexual Harassment/Assault Response Program (SHARP) violations (Department of the Army, 2019d). This minimum requirement should remain in place. However, if a sergeant volunteers four hours a month at the local Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) chapter, they have gone above the standard because the Army does not require this level of selfless service from the NCO. Furthermore, the staff sergeant who leads 20 Soldiers from their battalion to four community outreaches has not only gone beyond the Army's expectations, but has encouraged others to do so as well, far exceeding the standard in character.

A possible guide to grading the proposed four-box check system:

1.  Violated EO – did not meet standards.
2.  Did not violate EO – met standard.
3.  Supported EO – exceeded standard.
4.  Performed an extra duty supporting EO (for example, speaking at a post-wide Leader Professional Development on diversity, inclusion, and equity) – far exceeded the standard.

Other quantifiable examples of exceeding the standard for character include:

•   starting a clothing drive for a home-fire victim in the unit (empathy)
•   organizing a 5K run to promote SHARP
•   mentoring children or coaching youth activities (selfless service)
•   giving a class on diversity and ethics (EO)
•   spearheading a hasty relief effort after a natural disaster (warrior ethos)
•   initiating a company-level food train program for Soldiers with new-born babies (empathy)
•   leading an ethics-based leadership professional development session (Army Ethic)
•   volunteering to lead a blood drive for the brigade through the American Red Cross (warrior ethos)



U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Lynnsey Moen, a military police officer with the 652nd Regional Support Group, talks with second graders at a school in Powidz, Poland, Oct. 23, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by Master Sgt. Ryan C. Matson)



Figure 2 - Excerpt from *DA Form 1059*, March 2019 (Department of the Army, 2019e).

•   receiving public accolades from local or regional news media for a good cause (Army Values)
•   risking bodily harm to rescue another person (Army Values)

There is little doubt that the actions listed above go beyond what the Army requires from an NCO and each of these warrant an evaluation in character higher than "Met Standards."

## Objections

Assessing and evaluating character is difficult and there will be possible objections to changing it to a four-block system. The following are objection examples that could arise.

### Character is All or Nothing

Some may object by simply reinforcing the Army's original idea for the character block: an "all-in or not" assessment. However, on the Army's new DA Form 1059: Service School Academic Evaluation Report, the character block has a four-box check system, equal to all other leadership requirements (see Figure 2). If character can be assessed over a short period of time on DA Form 1059, then it can be adapted to a year-long NCOER.

### You Can't Measure Character

Leaders may have personal biases when assessing character. However, this also applies to the other leadership requirements. Focusing on quantifiable facts, acts, stats, and events reduces these individual biases. Moreover, leaders should be evaluating Soldiers against the Army Leadership Requirements Model, not personal opinion.

A related objection could be bullets that exceed standards in character can go in other areas of the NCOER. However, most performance bullets can go in multiple areas of the NCOER under the current system, so this is not a problem specific to evaluating character. Raters currently highlight their NCO's strongest bullets on the second page of the NCOER because there is no exceeds standards for the character block. If there were four boxes for character, raters

would place stronger bullets in that block.

### *Everyone will Exceed or Far Exceed Standards*

One could argue many NCOs will attempt to "spotlight" to receive a high rating in character. However, spotlighting already occurs in all other leadership requirements, such as volunteering to teach classes or leading a high-visibility support tasking. Moreover, if an NCO helps homeless people in the community because of the external motivator of a good evaluation, a good deed is still being done and this act of character possibly reshapes that person's character over time for benefit beyond the NCOER (Cherry, 2020; Post, 2011).

## Implementation of the Four-Box Character Evaluation

In order to implement the four-box check system in the character block, the ERS must undergo three simple changes. First, the DA must reformat the character section on *DA Form 2166-9-2* and *DA 2166-9-3* for Army Publishing Directorate and the Evaluation Entry System. The modification will accommodate the space for the four boxes.

Second, the Army must simply publish that the char-



Figure 3 - Updated Character Block for NCOER. (Graphic by Sgt. Maj. Demetris A. Prewitt, modified from *DA Form 2166-9-2*)

acter block on the NCOER has changed to match the other leadership requirements. *DA Pamphlet 623-3*, the instruction manual for completing the NCOER, requires no changes because the regulation already implies that the character block should have four boxes (Department of the Army, 2019d). The change would align the NCOER with the regulation (see Figure 3).

Finally, the Army must make a deliberate effort to educate leaders and commanders on the Army's two aspects of character: operational character and intrinsic character. This change would help leaders understand what to categorize as character on the NCOER and reinforce the idea that *character* is much more than supporting Army command programs. Moreover, the change would not be a substantial revision to any forms or regulation nor would it require the Army to change their current evaluation methodology. This means the Army can implement these changes quickly, without needing to overhaul the entire ERS. With an "Exceeded Standards" and "Far Exceeded Standard" boxes, the Army could begin to reward distinguished acts of character. This will guide the NCO Corps towards ethical and moral behavior, which would improve diversity, inclusion, and equality.

## Conclusion

Character is a hallmark of a trusted Army professional. With slight modifications, the Army can implement the four-box check system to *character* and guide NCOs towards ethical leadership. Only through strengthening the moral compass of the Army's backbone can it prevent sexual assault, harassment, racial and gender discrimination, suicide, domestic violence, and other issues affecting Army readiness and the quality of life of its Soldiers. Without character, there is no mutual trust between leaders and subordinates. Without trust, there is no mission command. ∎

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**Sgt. Maj. Demetris A. Prewitt** is the operations sergeant major of the 513th Military Intelligence Brigade. His previous assignments include first sergeant, Military Intelligence Company, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne); senior enlisted leader, Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Syria; and chief intelligence sergeant, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne). He has a bachelor's degree in leadership and workforce development from the Command and General Staff College and is pursuing a master's degree in strategic leadership from the University of Charleston-West Virginia.