



U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Scott C. Schroeder, command sergeant major of U.S. Army Forces Command, visits with a Soldier of 1st Battalion, 9th Field Artillery Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division Artillery, during a field training exercise at Fort Stewart, Georgia, March 8, 2017. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Nikki Felton)

# Communication and the Future CSM

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2nd Infantry Division

A unit's success in the U.S. Army can be a direct reflection of the relationship built between its Soldiers and their command sergeant major (CSM). Unit CSMs are looked upon to share experience, mentor subordinates, and push their units to achieve mission goals. This is only possible by building a relationship of trust and communicating effectively across a broad spectrum of responsibilities. Only through positive and effective communication can CSMs influence the climate and continued success of their organization. The problem is that not every CSM is a naturally gifted communicator or has had the same resources throughout their life or careers to become great at it. This article proposes using a new tool in conjunction with a mentorship program and

communication classes within the noncommissioned officer (NCO) career pipeline as a way to increase graduation rates and produce great leaders capable of communicating through every echelon.

## **Role of the Command Sergeant Major**

The role of the CSM as the senior enlisted advisor and backbone of the NCO corps began in 1967 (Mages et al., 2013). As the unit commander's principal advisor, talent manager, and overall leader in the Soldier training and development, the battalion CSM must communicate effectively along all levels of the organization.

Battalion CSMs affect the command climate through two separate but important areas of responsibility: battalion commanders and the Soldiers under their command.



U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Jeffery Weaver, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division command sergeant major, rappels during Jungle Operations Training Course at East Range, Hawaii, March 31, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by 1st Lt. Angelo Mejia)

## Solution

The first portion of the solution is to use the Army's new leader self-development tool, Project Athena, which uses assessments and feedback to build self-awareness and promote self-development through multiple learning resources (Center for the Army Profession and Leadership, n.d.). The tiered assessments build upon each other and are commensurate to the level of professional military education (PME) throughout a Soldier's career. Critical thinking assessments focus on cognitive processes, while others measure personal and professional traits and their direct influence on leadership and communication. These

assessments serve as a strong foundation for developing senior NCO communication skills at critical points throughout their careers.

According to Center for the Army Profession and Leadership:

*"Adding to the Army's culture of assessments, Project Athena uses batteries of assessments to increase a Soldier's self-awareness of leadership skills and behaviors, cognitive abilities, and personal traits and attributes. Assessment batteries are strategically selected to compliment the leadership skills being developed at a number of Army schools."* (Center for Army Profession and Leadership, n.d., para. 3)

While self-awareness and long-term development is crucial for Soldiers' careers, the Army should also provide a mentorship program where higher-ranking mentors outside the chain of command could help develop leadership and communication skills, preparing Soldiers for their next rank.

Finally, the Army has put a greater emphasis on writing as Soldiers progress through each level of PME. This culminates at the Sergeants Major Course, where Soldiers are expected to write effectively at a college level. The unfortunate truth is each Soldiers' level of preparedness varies due to life circumstances or high operational tempos. Based on the Project Athena assessments or mentor feedback, the Army can identify Soldiers who are not quite prepared for the next level of PME writing and offer them a communication preparation course. This could be done online and can be offered with each level of PME.

## Supporting the Battalion Commander

Considered the commanders' right arm, CSMs serve as the bridge between a unit's command team and its Soldiers. CSMs support the commander by communicating the organization's shared vision. According to Maj. Christopher Ford, "Leadership cannot occur without communication between the leader and the follower" (Ford, 2015, p. 1). Clear communication and trust build a *team first* atmosphere which fosters a positive command climate.

## Serving the Soldiers

Respect, selfless service, and integrity are strong organizational values that directly affect an organization's climate. Battalion CSMs should find time to engage with their Soldiers. Transformational leadership, often regarded as the most effective leadership style for leading troops, involves caring for Soldiers holistically, to include their values, goals, aspirations, and long-term development (Horval, 2020). This is accomplished through consistent and open lines of communication.

## The Problem

Effective communication is important and stressed throughout the Army, even down to the doctrinal level. *Field Manual (FM) 6-22: Leader Development* states, "Written directives, verbal communications, and leader actions all provide indications of how a leader influences others" (Department of the Army, 2015, p. 3-9).

Unfortunately, most Soldiers join the Army right out of high school and do not inherently possess mastery of basic written and oral communication skills. While this is a current obstacle, it can be overcome through early identification and extra skill work.

Furthermore, restructuring academic hours from practical exercises to individual communication development during each semester affords instructors the time to work directly with students while pairing others based on ability. Holistically, this three-tiered solution will better prepare Soldiers to complete and graduate their PME courses and make them master communicators and leaders by the time they reach the CSM level.

## Conclusion

By leveraging Project Athena, the U.S. Army can lean forward in establishing an effective communication base for future CSMs. The self-awareness, mentorship, and self-development opportunities allow senior NCOs to focus on effective communication techniques and establish positive organizational climates. Great communicators will lead and develop great Soldiers. ■

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