



A Soldier assigned to 7th Infantry Division climbs through a set of monkey bars while completing an obstacle course on July 19, 2022 during a best squad competition on Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wa. while participating in "Week of the Bayonet." (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Jerod Hathaway)

Transitioning from Soldier to Leader

Helping New Noncommissioned Officers Own Their Leadership Role

Larry Golba, Ph.D. - U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences

Holly C. Baxter, Ph.D. - Cognitive Performance Group

Manuel London, Ph.D. - State University of New York at Stony Brook

Gary Sherman, Ph.D. State University of New York at Stony Brook

Roger N. Daigle, CSM (ret.) Total Solutions, Inc.

Michael Schultz, CSM (ret.) TopSarge Business Solutions

The research described herein was sponsored by the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, Department of the Army (Contract Nos. W911NF-19-F-0052 and W911NF-19-2-0113). The views expressed in this presentation are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, DOD, or the U.S. Government.

The transition from junior enlisted Soldier to noncommissioned officer (NCO) can be daunting. Anecdotal stories and empirical evidence show there's no road map or clear path on how to transition into a leader. Soldiers must make numerous adjustments in professional, personal, and social domains as they navigate this elevation in role and responsibility. One major challenge is the shift in identity from team member to team leader. To make this shift, NCOs must want to be a leader, recognize the rewards of leadership, and separate themselves from their prior role as peer and team member. The degree to which new NCOs take ownership of the leadership role and embrace their new identity is a crucial factor in this transition. In this article, we report the results of a research study that identified ways NCOs and other leaders can support Soldiers as they prepare for and complete the transition into their leadership roles.

The first-hand accounts we received from Soldiers who were going through or had completed this transition suggested several actionable ways to improve the process. Some of the recommendations presented involve superiors providing clarity and structure, such as concretely explaining what the Army expects of new leaders and providing consistent feedback throughout the transition process. Other insights involved ensuring early and plentiful opportunities for new leaders to practice their leadership and allowing them the latitude to exercise decision-making authority. We also propose the use of after-action reviews (AARs) as a familiar and effective method to address these junior leadership development challenges.

The Transition from Soldier to Leader

In the U.S. Army, the shift in identity from follower to leader typically involves major changes in not only professional and personal contexts, but also in social and potentially residential contexts because many early career Soldiers are in a peer cohort, socializing and living together in the barracks. This is further complicated by the developmental phase of junior enlisted Soldiers who are often in their early- to mid- 20s and don't have a lot of life or leadership experience yet. This can be compounded by several individual developmental factors including personal identity formation, cognitive maturation, and social needs. Identifying, understanding, and developing the means to overcome the challenges they may encounter will enable the new leader to have a successful transition from team member to team leader.

How can the Army ensure junior NCOs are willing and able to take ownership of their positions and duties? For new leaders, the presence of important building blocks can set the foundation for growth into effective

leaders. These factors include motivation to lead, formation of a personal identity as a leader, identification of role models and mentors, and awareness of what the Army expects of them as a leader. New leaders also must develop self-confidence in their leadership ability and exercise decision-making autonomy to reinforce their leader identity and separate their new role from their previous role as a follower. Some Soldiers may not be fully ready for promotion at the time it occurs. However, the above factors can provide a solid base from which junior NCOs can confidently take the reins of leadership and execute their duties effectively.

Owning the Leadership Role

The Army has a long tradition of encouraging team identity. A strong and cohesive team identity is vital for ensuring victory in high-stakes missions the Army undertakes to defend our nation. However, in order to foster a culture of accountability and responsibility, there must be room for "I" as well. Ownership as a leader involves asking questions that require a focus on the self: "What can I do better to support the Soldiers in my squad or platoon?", "How can I improve this process?", and "What did I do, or not do, to contribute to solving a problem?"

The value of "I" statements has been shown across therapeutic, self-improvement, and recovery contexts, and these statements have similar value in the leadership context (Rogers et al., 2018). After all, we only have control over our own behavior, so starting with self-reflection and consideration of how one can improve is an important foundation for a leader. The question is how best to support new leaders in taking ownership of their leadership role, get them to see themselves as leaders and take responsibility for their own continued self-development.

First line leaders are important to daily functioning and goal accomplishment across all contexts and organizations. These direct leaders are particularly important in



The 10th Mountain Division (LI) Non-commissioned Officers Academy held a Basic Leaders Course Graduation Sep. 20, 2019, at the NCOA field on Fort Drum. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Brandon Cox)

the Army, where they have a major impact on all aspects of their Soldiers' lives. The NCOs who fill these roles are charged with leading, training, and taking care of their Soldiers. These responsibilities span from general orientation into Army life to skill building, and when needed, disciplinary action. Soldiers may need assistance with family, financial, or other problems that may not be directly related to their military duties but affect their personal lives and overall readiness. Because of the breadth and depth of their duties and responsibilities, it is imperative these junior leaders take active control of their new role.

The Army is a dynamic organization that requires proactive leaders at all levels to function optimally. Establishing a culture of trust and accountability that enables leaders to exercise their judgment on how best to accomplish the mission involves risk. In the interest of minimizing risk, often in an environment of "no-fail taskings" and "zero tolerance," superiors may be accustomed to dictating subordinate leaders' actions to ensure objectives are met. While this may offer some benefits for task completion in the short-term, it is likely to deprive subordinate leaders of developmental opportunities.

The purpose of this research was to identify challenges and barriers to a successful leadership transition and to identify strategies employed to navigate the transition.

Toward a Culture of Ownership

Ownership in this context refers to leaders actively taking responsibility and accountability for what happens in their small units. As highlighted in the popular book *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win* by Willink and Babin (2015), leaders who practice a style of leadership focused on being accountable and responsive can create highly effective work environments. The academic literature on ownership also points to positive outcomes for the individual and organization, assuming the right conditions are in place (e.g., identity, rather than control, is the primary route to ownership) (Ibarra, Wittman, and Petriglieri, 2014; Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks, 2001).

When leaders achieve identity-based ownership, they will more readily take responsibility and demonstrate accountability. By demonstrating ownership to both their superiors and their subordinates, they can foster trust throughout the chain of command and NCO support channel. Trust is necessary to enable leaders at all levels to function efficiently through delegation of tasks, allowing them to focus on their own tasks.

While ownership is instrumental for effective leadership, it can be difficult to realize in practice, particularly for those who are new to this role. Embracing the role of leader and accepting the responsibilities and duties inherent within is an important milestone in this process. An individual's leader identity will change across time and situation; however, establishing an initial sense of self as a leader enables one to take ownership of a position. There are many factors that impact leader identity formation, including acting as a leader and receiving positive feedback (DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Kragt and Day, 2020), having positive role models with whom to compare oneself (Guillén et al., 2015), and being able to separate from one's prior pre-leadership role (Snook et al., 2010). Identity and knowledge are also essential to creating ownership and can be cultivated through decision-making autonomy and developmental feedback (London, 2015; Maurer and London, 2018; London and Sherman, 2021).

In order to facilitate ownership, junior leaders must be allowed some autonomy to make decisions, to become actively involved in processes, and thus become invested in outcomes – whether good or bad. The chance to behave as leaders will establish and/or reinforce their perception of themselves as leaders. This will likely foster additional leadership behavior. This pattern, especially when combined with feedback on performance, can create a reinforcement cycle that continues to strengthen and increase positive leadership behavior (Yeager and Callahan, 2016).

The Role Transition Study

The purpose of this research was to identify challenges and barriers to a successful leadership transition and to identify strategies employed to navigate the transition. We conducted focus groups and interviews with 76 current prospective NCOs from a wide variety of Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) to capture their personal experiences leading up to their transition, during their transition, and after establishing themselves as leaders. We also administered questionnaires to 157 current or prospective NCOs from a wide variety of MOSs to quantify their expectations and experiences before and during this transition phase.

We used established mixed-method design principles to collect both qualitative and quantitative data relevant to target concepts we identified in our review of existing literature on leadership development. We analyzed the data using appropriate statistical software and multiple raters examined the data to ensure consistent interpretation.

The Results

One of the strongest findings was the importance of feedback to emerging leaders. In both the quantitative and qualitative results, feedback was seen as necessary and beneficial, both as a check on the new leaders' approach to leading as well as to benefit from the experience and knowledge of their senior leaders. The effect of guiding feedback regarding leading behavior was particularly important because new leaders are establish-



U.S. Army Sgt. Samuel Zuniga, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 512th Field Hospital crosses the archway during a Noncommissioned Officer Induction Ceremony, April 14, 2022 at Sembach, Germany. (U.S. Army Photo by Elisabeth Paqué)

ing their new leadership identities.

Another important component of the feedback was the clarification of what senior leaders expect of junior leaders. By providing a clear pattern for what is expected of them, junior leaders can be more secure in acting as leaders and taking ownership of their position. Without that clarity, junior leaders are often unsure of when or how to act and became more passive in their roles as a result.

The responses we received from Soldiers in this study highlighted the importance of decision-making autonomy in their developmental process. Junior leaders who were empowered to act as leaders tended to report more willingness to take ownership of their role as leaders than peers who were not given that latitude. Thus, established leaders can help set the stage for new leaders to take responsibility and accountability by allowing them opportunities to make meaningful decisions in the course of their duties. Emerging leaders should do more than just pass along orders to their Soldiers. They should be active agents in accomplishing objectives. Such autonomy may also be critical for bolstering their desire to lead and assume their leader identity. This can be particularly true for NCOs who were initially uncertain of whether they wanted to be leaders. After all, if leading is part of their identity—and not just another task to complete—that investment will ensure assigned tasks are done well, since failure is a threat to their sense of self.

Overall, our results converge into three key challenges many prospective and junior NCOs face: being promoted too early, lacking feedback and role models, and lacking motivation to lead. On the first result, some Soldiers believed they were promoted before they were ready to take on leadership duties as many Soldiers are promoted based on their time in service rather than their readiness to lead. Nevertheless, junior NCOs generally reported they acquired the necessary skills and self-development aspects as they performed the required leadership duties, though the timeline for acquisition varied from months to years.

Second, many junior NCOs were looking for role models but instead found many leaders who did not want to lead or who lacked the development to lead effectively. In these situations, constructive developmental feedback was rarely available.

Finally, many Soldiers simply lacked a desire to lead. In some cases, they joined the Army to escape a difficult family situation or for educational benefits. Few joined with the expressed goal of becoming leaders. Also, related to the previous point, those who experienced ineffective or disengaged leaders often reported a negative effect on their own desire to lead.

Actions for Leader Development

Finding ways to address these developmental needs is difficult because leaders at all levels have constant demands on their and their Soldiers' time. However, our results suggest several ways in which established leaders can focus their efforts to support junior leader development. We developed the following five approaches

to help give established leaders a roadmap for facilitating the key experiences, knowledge, and growth necessary for new enlisted leaders to succeed.

Clarify Expectations for New Leaders

A primary challenge reported by Soldiers transitioning to NCOs is a lack of clarity about the expectations the Army has of its leaders. Established leaders may have different expectations of their up-and-coming leaders depending on the unit type, echelon, mission, or their own leadership philosophy. This can make it difficult to have specific expectations for new leaders across the entire Army; however, communicating the fundamental expectations of NCOs across the Army can provide a starting point. This can largely be achieved by reinforcing guidance provided in the Army's leadership doctrine, such as *FM 6-22 Leader Development* and *TC 7-22.7 The Noncommissioned Officer Guide* (Department of the Army, 2015; 2020). From that common base, senior leaders can then communicate the specifics of local expectations for new leaders. Additionally, new NCOs can advance this process by asking their superiors to clarify expectations about which they are unsure.

Give Developmental Feedback

Throughout our research, most Soldiers expressed a desire to receive consistent feedback throughout the transition into leadership roles. In fact, many developing leaders wanted input not only from their supervisor but also from their peers, mentors, and role models. However, when a superior provides feedback to an emerging leader, the presentation and style of that feedback is ex-

tremely important. If the superior leader's tone is overly negative or degrading, that Soldier may be reticent to listen to and act on the leader's recommendations. On the other hand, when a leader takes time in a relaxed setting away from other NCOs or Soldiers, the junior NCO will be much more likely to listen, ask questions, and develop ways to implement the feedback.

Mentor feedback was also seen as highly important and positively affected development for Soldiers who had a strong mentor. As the circumstances of that feedback are distinct from supervisor feedback, the mentor's outside perspective allows for a more open exploration of issues and challenges. Mentees report benefiting greatly from these exchanges and appreciate the opportunity to learn from more experienced leaders.

Create Opportunities for Leadership Practice

Many NCOs who made the transition from specialist/corporal to sergeant would appreciate more time and opportunities to practice leadership responsibilities before being promoted to a leadership position. The answer to this challenge is not adding more time spent in the schoolhouse, as this is unlikely to occur and conflicts to some degree with the NCO Academy mission to provide new NCOs a general framework from which to develop further as leaders within their specific MOS and unit. To enable future NCOs to have more time to practice being leaders, some units developed specific programs for emerging leaders to get functional practice leading. Some of these programs include developing a Junior Leadership Academy where unit NCOs volunteer their time to serve as mentors and observe future NCOs practice leadership skills without formal evaluations or repercussions. Another technique is a shadowing program where a future NCO works directly with an NCO in a leadership role observing the daily functions of that position.

It is important to note that some individuals can work through the challenges of transition with limited guidance or assistance, often due to prior leadership roles or other life experiences. However, Soldiers who are younger or have not had opportunities to lead in scouts, sports, clubs, etc. may be less equipped to develop strategies to overcome challenges on their own. Defining the chal-

lenges and determining ways for Soldiers to overcome them will not be a one-size-fits-all process. It will require active involvement from mentors and supervisors to ensure individuals are equipped with the tools and experience they need to succeed in the transition.

Create Opportunities for Decision-Making Autonomy

A concern related to leadership opportunities is decision-making autonomy. Many new leaders stated they had little latitude to make meaningful decisions due to micromanagement or other constraints. In other instances, they reported shying away from making decisions or exercising authority because they felt their immediate supervisor or leaders in the chain of command/NCO support channel would not support them or would negate their decisions. NCOs reported that when they were allowed to make meaningful decisions, or be involved in larger planning processes, their confidence built rapidly and their ability to make sound decisions greatly increased in efficiency and accuracy.



Sgt. John Bighamian reaches the top of a rock face during Advanced Military Mountaineering Course (AMMC) Jul. 8, 2022. AMMC students learn how to operate as the lead climber, placing ropes and artificial protection for follow-on forces in mountainous terrain. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Christopher Dennis)

Encourage Identity Shift from Team Member to Leader

Another common challenge for Soldiers transitioning to the NCO Corps is moving away from being

within a peer cohort one day to leading those same peers the next. Sometimes there are simple solutions to this challenge such as transferring the Soldier to a different unit. This works well for high density MOSs such as infantry, armor, military police, or engineers. For low density or highly specialized MOSs, such as intelligence, signal, cyber, and medical corps, this is often not as easy to accomplish because of the limited positions or depth of knowledge needed for a particular position. In these cases, finding a mentor or role model to guide the new leader through the transition helps immensely.

Another way to mitigate this challenge is having a squad leader, platoon sergeant, or first sergeant develop a professional growth plan to assist in counseling and guiding new NCOs through the changes necessary to

shift into leadership roles. Allowing prospective leaders sufficient time to process and prepare for the change can also be beneficial. A step toward this has been the policy change for lateral appointment from specialist to corporal, upon recommendation for promotion and graduation from the Basic Leader Course (BLC) (Lacdan, 2021). This rite of passage welcomes these new leaders into the NCO Corps, brings a sense of pride and accomplishment, and supports their identity shift into being a leader.

After-Action Review (AAR) as a Catalyst for Development

The challenge for the U.S. Army, as with most organizations, is how to encourage new leaders to embrace ownership of their role. The U.S. Army first developed the AAR as a learning methodology in the 1970s. Its purpose was to create a structured means to facilitate day-to-day learning from combat training exercises. Due to the effectiveness of this tool, it was widely applied as a general practice across virtually all areas of training and garrison environments (“After-Action Reviews,” 2021).

The Army teaches the importance of ownership of the leadership role in the NCO Professional Development System and reinforces this point through local sergeants’ time training and other NCO professional development opportunities. However, there is a sense the Army has slowly drifted away from consistent and intentional use of the AAR, which was previously a key contributor in developing new leaders. Typically, this shift is attributed to the volume of taskings and other requirements, which due to their visibility and ease of tracking, often take precedence over unstructured but important developmental processes.

Today, junior NCOs are often in the position of trying to complete seemingly never-ending lists of tasks passed down through the chain of command. These NCOs often feel the priority of completing the mission is more important than seeking the valuable lessons to be learned from conducting AARs consistently. Even in units where AARs

are still conducted consistently at the company level, anecdotal reports received show the AAR execution is diluted or seen as a “check the box” by junior NCOs and Soldiers.

Throughout the early evolution of the AAR, it was apparent that value for junior leaders came not only in seeing the process for how individual tasks are completed to standard, but it also highlighted the developmental importance of observing their leaders’ decision-making and owning the results (good or bad) of those decisions. It appears much of this value has diminished in recent years as it has become more common to conduct perfunctory AARs, which meet the letter, but not the intent, of the process.

While the role of the AAR in leader development was not a specific focus of our research, the cycle of planning, executing, and reviewing activities provides for the range of functional leadership practices needed to address the developmental needs of junior NCOs highlighted in our results. Therefore, by intentionally reengaging in a time-tested practice, the Army can likely alleviate many of the issues identified through our research into initial leadership role transition.

Conclusion

Junior NCOs face many challenges as they transition into leadership roles. The results of our research suggest that several important factors that predict better outcomes (greater transition to leader identity, greater desire to lead) are within the control of Army leaders. These include providing feedback/mentorship, clarifying expectations, and giving junior NCOs some decision-making autonomy. The good news is that these needs can be addressed at all levels and in all components because the mechanisms to do so already exist in the Army. By empowering junior NCOs to act in their role as direct leaders and providing them with performance and developmental feedback, the U.S. Army can prepare them for an easy transition from junior Soldier to respected leader. ■

References

- After-action reviews: A simple yet powerful tool. (2021). Wharton. <https://executiveeducation.wharton.upenn.edu/thought-leadership/wharton-at-work/2021/07/after-action-reviews-simple-tool/>
- Department of the Army. (2015). *Training Circular 7-22.7: The noncommissioned officer guide*. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN20340_TC%207-22x7%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf
- Department of the Army. (2020). *Field Manual 6-22: Leader development*. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/fm6_22.pdf
- DeRue, D. S., & Ashford, S. J. (2010). Who will lead and who will follow? A social process of leadership identity construction in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 35, 627-647. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.35.4.zok627>
- Guillén, L., Mayo, M., & Korotov, K. (2015). Is leadership a part of me? A leader identity approach to understanding the motivation to lead. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 26(5), 802-820. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.05.001>
- Ibarra, H., Wittman, S., Petriglieri, G., & Day, D. V. (2014). Leadership and identity: An examination of three theories and new research directions. In D. V. Day (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of leadership and organizations* (pp. 285–301). Oxford University Press.
- Kragt, D., & Day, D. V. (2020). Predicting leadership competency development and promotion among high-potential executives: The role of leader identity. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1816. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01816>

Lacdan, J. (2021). *Soldiers to pin on corporal after BLC*. Army News Service. <https://www.army.mil/article/247183/soldiers-to-pin-on-corporal-after-blc>

London, M. (2015). *The power of feedback: Giving, seeking, and using feedback for performance improvement*. Rout-

ledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

London, M., & Sherman, G. D. (2021). Becoming a leader: Emergence of leadership style and identity. *Human Resource Development Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15344843211009632>

Manuel London, Ph.D. is Dean of the College of Business and distinguished professor of Management, College of Business, State University of New York at Stony Brook. He received his PhD in Industrial & Organizational Psychology from the Ohio State University. Dr. London's research is in the areas of performance management, leader development, career motivation, and team learning.

Larry W. Golba, Ph.D. (Clinical Psychology) is a Research Psychologist for the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences. He has practiced and conducted research in many contexts including forensic psychology, behavioral threat assessment, and leader development. He served seven years on active duty in the U.S. Army.

Holly C. Baxter, Ph.D. (Clinical Psychology) is the Chief Scientist for Cognitive Performance Group. She has spent more than 25 years studying all aspects of cognitively based training solutions, human performance, leadership development, Cognitive Task Analysis, and knowledge management. She has worked as a senior advisor and consultant for the United Nations Development Programme, World Bank, US Army, US Navy, US Marine Corps, and numerous Fortune 50 companies. Dr. Baxter earned her Ph.D. in Interpersonal and Organizational Communication and Business Management from Indiana University

CSM(R) Roger N. Daigle Jr is the Senior Army Instructor for the Windermere High School Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps in Windermere, Florida. He is a retired US Army Command Sergeant Major with more than 30 years of service as a Military Intelligence professional. He often consults industry partners in subject matter expertise on issues concerning Soldiers, Marines, Sailors and Airmen. He earned a Bachelor Science in Liberal Arts from Excelsior College of New York in June 2004.

Gary Sherman, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Management at Stony Brook University. Before joining Stony Brook, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the Harvard Initiative for Learning and Teaching and at the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School. Dr. Sherman's research explores (1) social hierarchy, leadership, and power, and (2) behavioral ethics, including the organizational conditions that encourage ethical behavior. He received his Ph.D. in Social Psychology from the University of Virginia.

Marc D. Pfahlers is a Research Scientist for Cognitive Performance Group working in the areas of Human Factors and Research Psychology with the U.S. military. His research interests include human trust factors, multimodal biometric systems, and human interactions with autonomous systems. He holds a bachelor's degree in Psychology from the University of Cincinnati.

CSM (R) Mike Schultz is the Program Manager (Contractor) for the United States Army Reserve Private Public Partnership Office (P30) at Ft. Belvoir, Virginia. He is currently completing a Ph.D in Education, with emphasis on Organization Leadership. He served in the Army for more than 34 years with deployments to both Iraq and Afghanistan. CSM(R) Mike Schultz last assignment in the Army he was the 10th Senior Enlisted Advisor for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs.



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

