



Sgt. 1st Class Kyle B. Ihrke (left), fire support NCO for 1st Battalion, 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade and Capt. William R. Edwards, fire support officer for 1st Bn., 1st SFAB, study a map at Fort Benning, Georgia, Nov. 2, 2017. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Sierra A. Melendez, 50th Public Affairs Detachment, 3rd Infantry Division public affairs)

Building the Command Relationship through PME

By Sgt. Maj. Jason Abitua

Sergeants Major Academy

If a lower-ranking Soldier speaks directly to a platoon leader or any officer, especially without a noncommissioned officer (NCO) present, it could be a bad day for said Soldier. Pushups or other punitive exercises may follow. This was my experience as a new Soldier in the Army. Perhaps because new Soldiers or junior NCOs may not necessarily understand NCO and officer

functions, since they are rarely talked about. If a Soldier asked a newly promoted NCO, “What do officers do?” The answer may be, “They do paperwork, don’t worry about it,” or “stay in your lane.” Personally, I had no clue what officers did or their importance to how we executed daily activities and training missions. When I joined, I had no idea how important forming strong



U.S. Army Reserve Master Sgt. Morocco Cornett, assigned to the 7302nd Medical Training Support Battalion, Medical Readiness and Training Command, Army Reserve Medical Command, based in Madison, Wis., and Capt. Caleb Baranczyk team up to prevent a board from falling off a post as they navigate the Double Culvert obstacle of the Field Leadership Reaction Course on Fort McCoy, Wis., May 14, 2022. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Sgt. 1st Class Clinton Wood)

working relationships with officers would be later in my career. However, I later learned to ensure the organization's maximum output, as an NCO I needed to build mutual trust and a shared understanding my officers. This changed everything for me. The U.S. Army should modify its existing PME to create a collaborative learning environment in which officers and NCOs learn and work together to better understand each other's roles and create an environment of shared understanding, trust, and ultimately, operational efficiency and effectiveness.

With frequent force-wide policy changes, natural shifts in Army culture, and the evolution from operating in counter-insurgency operations to multi-domain large-scale operations, officers and NCOs must better integrate to ensure continuity and quality of operations. New leaders should work together during initial training, at professional military education schools, and before arriving at their units, to better prepare them for critical leadership positions. The Army could integrate portions of professional military education earlier in Soldiers' careers.

By combining certain officer and NCO PME, the Army could establish quality NCO and officer relationships critical to operations across the force. These combined classes would provide officers and NCOs an opportunity to learn standard communication methods, navigate complicated Soldier issues with scenario-based learning, learn Army doctrine, team planning and execution practice, and do so together. Ultimately these experiences would build trust and shared understanding. This, in turn, would make a future transition into a command relationship considerably easier.

Once NCOs achieve the position of platoon sergeant, they are responsible for developing and advis-

ing officers at multiple echelons, as well as shaping and training their junior-enlisted Soldiers and NCOs. Regardless of experience, they are charged with shaping junior officers' views and opinions, which profoundly influence their careers. Thus, NCOs need to set a good example and have the skills to build trust and better communicate with their junior officer counterparts.

New officers fresh out of the Basic Officer Leadership Course (BOLC) need "reverse mentorship" driven by the NCO's experience, skills, and knowledge. Boroff (2020) states that the Army should start teaching NCOs the skills needed to mentor and lead junior officers starting in the Advanced Leaders Course (ALC) (para. 7). By combining professional military education for officers and NCOs at the senior level, bridging information gaps, and developing a shared understanding, the Army can further enhance the ability of future command teams to communicate and operate at a more proficient level than the Army has ever experienced.

Background

Huntington (2005) states that many enlisted personnel in the military do not have the same intellectual skill or the responsibility as many officer counterparts. They are journeymen; their skills are part of a trade, not a profession (p. 17).

That statement used to be true of the Army's NCOs. Historically, NCOs have been un- or under-educated, very rough around the edges, and were only experts in training Soldiers and carrying out orders. However, the Army made significant strides progressing the NCO corps since the 1980s. The Army now operates with the highest level of military education since its induction (Garamone, 2019). Many of the NCOs within the Army's ranks have earned bachelor's degrees or higher. Garamone (2019) highlights this by explaining how U.S. NCOs perform tasks typically reserved for officers in many other countries because of the advanced PME they complete during their enlistment.

With increased education and quality comes increased responsibility. It is clear the U.S. Army will continue to ask even more of NCOs in the future. The Department of the Army (1997) states senior NCOs have to form, guide, and teach junior officers the nuances of Army life. When done correctly, they can drastically minimize the number of issues officers face in the future. NCOs should show officers how sub-tasks and jobs supplement each other when accomplishing overall tasks. NCOs can show the legitimacy of unwritten laws of the warfighter. The Army does not teach NCOs these lessons in any institutions.

The Army already recognized the need to further NCOs' education by aligning the Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A) with the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) curriculum. Aligning the curriculum is an excellent first step in solving the problem, but it's not the complete solution. The Army fell short in leveraging today's technology to close the educational divide and build and strengthen the relationship between NCOs and officers.

Problem

By the time NCOs assume responsibility at the company level, they have a plethora of experience and a moderate level of education in comparison to officers, who have more education with a slight to moderate level of experience. Officers also face force culture hurdles.

Boroff (2020) explains that stereotypes exist in the Army regarding officers' and NCOs' conduct which can be detrimental to organizational culture (p. 1). Based on those stereotypes and experiences, they usually have a positive or a negative outlook on the other corps.

Once officers take company-level command, or assume staff positions where they are the officers in charge, they have already forged opinions of the NCO corps. These opinions will affect how they employ their subordinate NCOs in daily tasks. They can also lead to a potentially unstable commander and senior NCO relationship, making it very difficult to reverse the perception if the experience is negative. In this situation, senior NCOs must change and or sway the minds of relatively young captains to garner their trust in the NCO corps.

Additionally, the problem NCOs face is the late

introduction of training on this particular issue through professional military education in a NCO's career. It should occur much earlier.

Before joining their command teams, NCOs need the techniques and the opportunity to run through scenarios that simulate a command relationship. This opportunity would allow both parties to speak the same language when it comes to command decisions, doctrine, training, and professional development, which is a massive asset to an effective command team. Fust (2021) states there is an overlap in the curriculum between the CGSC and the SMG-A covering leadership, the Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP), and practical exercises covering large scale operations (p. 1). The Army is missing the opportunity for officers and NCOs to share their perspectives, experience, and knowledge in a classroom environment where it is safe to try new ideas and grow as leaders under the supervision of experienced leaders.

The Solution

The solution to the officer and NCO divide would be relatively inexpensive for the Army since it already provides PME for both officers and NCOs. The question then becomes, at what level does the Army need to bridge the educational divide and introduce doctrine and scenarios on how NCOs can effectively work with their officer counterparts. The current First Sergeant/Commanders Course on each installation, required prior to taking command, does not cover these topics. It only provides future/new first sergeants and commanders with installation resources and currently available opportunities within the area of operations.

Lopez (2015) states, "Soldiers expecting to pin on sergeant first class as a result of the fiscal year 2016 selection board must first complete the Senior Leader Course (SLC) before pinning on their new rank" (para. 5). With most modification tables of organization and equipment (MTOE) across the Army having sergeants first class slotted in platoon sergeant positions, this is a perfect opportunity to introduce the importance of the officer and NCO's relationship.

La Falce (2017) quotes retired Maj. Gen. Donald, "The officer and NCO relationship is like a marriage. When you are married, you take care of each other" (para. 4-6). Currently, the Army does not have any education that places that level of importance on the officer and NCO relationship and waiting until they come together to a command could be time better spent.

Building on that entry-level education on the officer and NCO relationship during SLC, the next step would combine educational experiences during the Captains Career Course (CCC) and the Master Leader Course (MLC).



U.S. Army Soldiers pause to discuss map route during land navigation in one of the Contracting Operational Readiness Exercise-21 (CORE-21) events, on Camp Bullis in San Antonio, Texas, April 19, 2021. CORE-21 training exercise focused on acquisition support and prepared Soldiers to execute their skillsets in a contingency environment by accomplishing two parallel efforts that focused on Army Reserve Sustainment Command's Logistics Civil Augmentation Program and Contingency Contracting Battalions. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Briana Polar)

At first glance, this is a daunting task. How could the Army get both parties to the same location for a small fraction of their respective courses? With today's technologies and almost a year of working in a virtual capacity due to the pandemic, the foundation is in place to provide collaborative, virtual classes.

The Army would also continue this blueprint for officers attending CGSC and NCOs at SGM-A. Typically, four to six courses are held each year, depending on the branch, for both CCC and MLC. They would not need to start simultaneously, even though that would be advantageous, but they would have to structure a course overlap so both schools could focus on joint topics. This overlapping course structure would be the same format at the CGSC and SGM-A level courses.

Finally, the schools would need to combine their curriculum focus areas. Once combined, they would give officers and NCOs a better-shared knowledge, the opportunity for in-depth discussions, and an environment to run them together through practical exercises.

Giving company and battalion-level command teams the opportunity to work through real-life situations in educational-based scenarios would allow them the opportunity to make mistakes and increase their operational experience in a controlled environment. In addition, fostering open discussions in a combined group setting will allow officers and NCOs to see each side's perspec-

tive on essential topics leaders face, which will only increase their ability to make informed, sound decisions in the future.

This style of education was used in a case study in the simulation center at a U.S. medical center, and according to Larmon (2006), they found that students who learn critical assessment and management skills using realistic scenarios perform better than students who get comparative skills in an intellectual issue-based learning design (p. 6).

Conclusion

The age of NCOs focusing solely on uniform standards and the trivial has come and gone. Our operational environment has changed and new expectations and responsibilities challenge today's NCOs. Combining portions of professional military education for officers and NCOs at all levels would enhance productivity in future command teams. No additional funding is needed since both officers and NCOs attend similar courses with overlapping topics. Centers of Excellence could collaborate to ensure the identified courses overlap. If the U.S. Army switches to a collaborative learning environment, the force will have better shared understanding and knowledge. This in turn will increase the Army's operational effectiveness, which ultimately benefits the Soldiers who fight and win the nation's wars. ■

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