



The Noncommissioned Officer Leadership Center of Excellence (NCOLCoE) at Fort Bliss, Texas, serves as the center of NCO professional development. NCOLCoE is undergoing significant organizational changes to streamline its structure and enhance agility, ensuring it remains effective in preparing NCOs for modern military challenges. (U.S. Army Photo by James Seals)

Drive Change: The NCO Leadership Center of Excellence

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The NCO Leadership Center of Excellence and Sergeants Major Academy

“It doesn’t matter how good you are today; if you’re not better next month, you’re no longer agile. You must always, always, always try to improve.”

– Mike Cohn, Agile Trainer and author of Succeeding with Agile: Software Development Using Scrum Methodology

The NCO Leadership Center of Excellence (NCOLCoE) serves as the center of professional development for the Army’s noncommissioned officers (NCOs) through the NCO professional

Driving Change

In the face of technological advancements and evolving global conflicts, military institutions need agile, responsive structures.

Driving Change highlights programs from the NCO Leadership Center of Excellence (NCOLCoE) and the Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A) addressing challenges and enhancing the development of NCOs. This is the first in the series.

development system. Located at Fort Bliss, Texas, NCOLCoE has a long history of developing the skills NCOs need to lead Soldiers in combat. However, the rapid transformation in military technology and the nature of today's global conflicts present new challenges that stress the center's capabilities to the limit.

Gen. James E. Rainey, commanding general of Army Futures Command, recently said, "Whatever you think you know this year, come back in 90 days, and you'll know something different" (Hurd, 2024).

As the character of war evolves, so must the organization responsible for educating NCOs. This article discusses the organizational changes at NCOLCoE in response to the Army's rapid transformation, focusing on the need for adaptation, methods employed for success, and ways to assess proposed actions to ensure effectiveness.

Why Change

In July 2023, NCOLCoE's organizational structure supported its functions:

- Maintain accreditation of the bachelor's degree in leadership and workforce development as the fourth branch campus of the Command and General Staff College
- Maintain curriculum design and development for all NCO common core
- Execute mission command over the Army NCO academies

These responsibilities needed a top-heavy and cumbersome structure, which, while robust, barred efficient communication and collaboration. As the Army accelerated its transformation efforts, NCOLCoE struggled to keep pace. The situation was akin to building a rocket ship in flight.

Structural complexities made it challenging to respond quickly to the fast-paced changes in the operational environment. Without a significant organizational overhaul, NCOLCoE risked falling behind the Army's modernization efforts. To remain effective and relevant, NCOLCoE recognized the need to streamline its structure, enhance agility, and improve internal and external communication channels.

NCOLCoE directors and leaders must communicate and collaborate effectively, which creates extensive lead times for completing routine actions internally and with external headquarters. In an environment where fast-paced decision cycles were the norm, these delays were no longer acceptable. NCOLCoE needed a more flattened structure to enhance organizational agility. The goal was to improve the speed and efficiency of communication and foster a more responsive and collaborative environment.

According to Kleinman et al. (2020), flattening an organization enhances its effectiveness and efficiency through:

- **Enhanced communication.** Reducing hierarchical layers allows information to flow directly and quickly throughout the organization. The improved interaction leads to quicker decision-making and problem-solving.
- **Increased agility.** The organization can respond more rapidly to changes and emerging challenges, an essential capability in today's demanding environment.
- **Improved collaboration.** Fewer barriers between directorates and leadership levels foster a more cooperative working environment.

How NCOLCoE Achieved Change

NCOLCoE employed analytical tools and took a strategic approach to address the challenges posed by its organizational structure and the changing operational environment. Here are two examples:

The "3 buckets" exercise

This approach categorized functions by directorate into:

1. Those the organization was doing
2. Those the organization should stop doing
3. Those the organization was not doing but should

NCOLCoE executed this exercise for two months, discussing each bucket by directorate and staff section. The process provided a clear framework for evaluating functions by directorate and allowed leaders to find critical areas for improvement.

The "what's working, what's not working" exercise

This initiative enhanced open, collaborative engagement by involving team members' input and perspectives. The exercise helped pinpoint functions and systems performing well and those falling short, allowing the organization to capitalize on strengths and address weaknesses more effectively. The activity proved powerful for meaningful organizational change.

Informed with data from these exercises and others, NCOLCoE hosted a two-day strategic off-site conference in February to synthesize the findings and determine the best courses of action to meet the Commandant's intent of flattening the organization.

During the conference, NCOLCoE staff spent time with key leaders and directorates split into three working groups. The teams searched for solutions to problems found during the data collection process. This approach ensured restructuring efforts were well-informed, targeted, and capable of enhancing NCOLCoE's agility and effectiveness in meeting the mission and functions outlined by the Army.

The conference's conclusion was the time to transition

from planning to implementation. The NCOLCoE leadership developed and executed a detailed plan and task order to implement the agreed-upon changes. This plan outlined clear objectives, timelines, and responsibilities and ensured the management of every aspect of the restructuring process.

Leaders assigned tasks to directorates and individuals, setting milestones to check progress and address emerging challenges. This approach smoothed the implementation of changes and aligned them with the goals identified during the conference.

Keeping Your Eye on the Prize

Miller (2020) states that completing a change initiative does not guarantee success. Even though NCOLCoE reached initial operating capacity, the organization must perform periodic assessments to decide if the change is “sticking” or if adjustments are necessary.

These assessments ensure the new structure is effective and aligned with the organization’s functions and mission. This assessment period also offers NCOLCoE deeper insights into its operations, strengths, and areas for improvement, fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation.

Another way NCOLCoE ensures the modifications stick is by codifying the structural changes in NCOLCoE Regulation 10-1. It outlines NCOLCoE’s organization, mission, and functions, providing a framework for how it must conduct operations.

Documenting the changes communicates the new structure to all personnel, including incoming members, ensuring everyone understands their organizational roles and responsibilities. This approach aids consistency and clarity, smooths transition, and reinforces the new organizational framework.

NCOLCoE does not expect to reach full operating

capacity until Oct. 1, but communication has already improved and collaboration become more efficient. While no change comes without issues, the structural improvements met with little to no resistance.

However, implementing the changes has caused problems with day-to-day operations. For example, individual directorates didn’t initially realize the added tasks they had gained due to the restructuring, leading to confusion. Conducting a full assessment at next year’s conference will allow NCOLCoE to address these issues and ensure changes are fully integrated and effective.

Conclusion

NCOLCoE is pivotal in NCO professional development and faces significant challenges from rapid advancements in military technology and the evolving nature of global conflicts. Recognizing the need for a more agile and responsive structure, NCOLCoE undertook a strategic overhaul to improve communication, collaboration, and operational efficiency. Through targeted exercises and strategic off-site engagement, leadership found critical areas for improvement and implemented a streamlined organizational framework.

Codifying these changes in NCOLCoE Regulation 10-1 ensures clarity and consistency in operations, making the new structure clear to all personnel. Continuous assessment and feedback mechanisms allow evaluations of the changes’ effectiveness, providing adaptability and process refinement as needed. Early results show improved communication and collaboration, highlighting the benefits of a flatter organizational structure.

NCOLCoE remains effective in preparing NCOs for modern military challenges. ■

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