



Master sergeants play a pivotal role in the military hierarchy, mentoring junior Soldiers to ensure operations' success. A natural step in their evolution is becoming first sergeants and overseeing a company's welfare, training, and discipline. This role significantly expands their leadership and influence in the Army. (Graphic by NCO Journal)

# Stepping in as First Sergeant: Balancing Duty and Choice

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**Class 74, Sergeants Major Course**

**L**eadership is crucial to shaping an organization or society's direction and success. Leaders who willingly assume roles of responsibility drive progress and inspire others to contribute their best efforts toward common goals (Department of the Army [DA], 2019).

Master sergeants play a pivotal role in the military hierarchy, mentoring junior Soldiers to ensure operations' success. A natural step in their evolution is becoming first sergeants and overseeing a company's welfare, training, and discipline (DA, 2023d). This role significantly expands their leadership and influence in the Army.

Despite its importance, some master sergeants

decline the first sergeant position. The Army must address this through clear guidelines that ensure master sergeants readily step into first sergeant roles when called upon to do so. This approach will safeguard leadership integrity and succession, and promote fairness and duty fulfillment.

## Background

In recent years, the Army revamped its promotion system for enlisted personnel (Erickson, 2024). However, lateral appointments — implemented when a position demands a higher rank or pay grade's expertise or

leadership attributes without necessitating an official promotion — remain unchanged. Notable lateral appointments include transitions from specialist to corporal, master sergeant to first sergeant, and sergeant major to command sergeant major (DA, 2023a).

Designed to fill crucial skills gaps, this system provides career development opportunities that build on the next rank and pay grade. Although individuals' responsibilities and ranks increase, their pay grades and allowances remain unchanged. This approach allows the Army to manage human resources flexibly and meet operational needs efficiently without exceeding budget or mandated staffing levels.

Additionally, the Army may quickly adapt via procedures under the policy exception framework to fill critical leadership roles. This flexibility ensures essential positions remain filled and highlights succession's importance.

### Master Sergeant and First Sergeant Roles

As seasoned NCOs, master sergeants possess a wealth of experience and knowledge critical for training, developing, and mentoring junior Soldiers. Their role often involves overseeing specialized tasks, coordinating troops, and implementing strategic goals at the operational level.

Master sergeants lead by example, embody Army core values, and prepare their subordinates for the challenges of daily military life and the rigors of combat (DA, 2020). Their roles and responsibilities are a segway to the meticulous attention to detail and high organizational level required of first sergeants.

First sergeants, however, carry additional heightened responsibilities. As companies' senior NCOs, they are the commanders' primary advisors on all matters concerning enlisted personnel. They manage issues from career progression and professional development to personal and family support, ensuring Soldiers have the resources and support needed to succeed.

Often seen as linchpins, first sergeants bridge the gap between the enlisted population and the commissioned officers who make decisions that progress the unit forward. They accomplish this by exerting influence through their official position and personal leadership, shaping options that affect units' day-to-day life and climate (DA, 2020).

The immense pressure associated with this position poses an ethical dilemma for the Army. It must ensure master sergeants readily accept first sergeant positions.

### Root Cause

The recruiting challenges across all military branches are significant and widely acknowledged, yet they represent just one aspect of the broader issue the armed forces must navigate (Novelly et al., 2023). A challenge the Army faces is developing senior leadership continuity, a key factor for mission success and operational readiness (Schmidt, 2023).

The Army uses an exception to policy through military personnel (MILPER) messages to tackle this issue. These policies provide a framework for appointments of highly qualified NCOs to essential leadership positions, such as master sergeant appointment to sergeant major, sergeant first class appointment to first sergeant, and sergeant major to command sergeant major with specific conditions. Designed as a stopgap solution, these appointments prevent leadership gaps until NCOs are permanently placed or officially released from the unit (DA, 2023c).

Such an approach requires considering all ethical perspectives and options before Army leadership finalizes and communicates to the force. Significant implications can result.

### Implications

The policy generally doesn't specify a definitive period qualified NCOs will serve in a position.

Nor does it guarantee a promotion — potentially raising concerns about retention and motivation (DA, 2023c). The absence of a fixed term can lead to performance evaluations that do not accurately reflect Soldiers' overall capabilities — especially when compared to peers performing their appropriate roles and responsibilities (or others in similar roles).

Moreover, in subsequent evaluation boards, lack of shared understanding among reviewers can adversely affect service members' sequence number for promotion. This inconsistency can impede career progression or lead to premature departure from service. Additionally, there is no requirement mandating that master sergeants who are ineligible for lateral promotion to sergeant major fill the first



First Sgt. Frank Nauta, Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, recites the creed of the NCO during an NCO induction ceremony at Fort Carson, Colorado, Jan. 8, 2021. The Army must implement guidelines that ensure master sergeants readily step into first sergeant roles when called upon to do so. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Daniel Parker)



sergeant role before a selected sergeant first class, as alluded to in the sergeant major to command sergeant major MILPER message (DA, 2023b).

The absence of clear requirements for master sergeants to step into first sergeant roles can significantly impact unit effectiveness and cohesion. This policy gap can complicate succession planning. It may lead to inconsistencies in unit leadership transitions, potentially disrupting a stable leadership pipeline (Schmidt, 2023).

Such disruptions can weaken unit cohesion and operational effectiveness, as roles essential for operations and mentorship may remain unfilled or occupied by less-experienced personnel. Furthermore, compared with the MILPER message directing transitions from sergeant major to command sergeant major, there are clear stipulations for compliance and implications for those not eligible for retirement (DA, 2023b).

This contrast highlights a disparity in policy equity and contributes to a noticeable reluctance among master sergeants to embrace first sergeant positions. Such hesitancy highlights the need for a solution, as it sends a negative message and indicates a self-serving bias.

## Solution

A comprehensive and multifaceted solution is vital to effectively address senior leadership continuity. The primary strategy involves revising the exceptions to policy concerning promotions, specifically mandating that master sergeants ineligible for promotion to sergeant major should serve as first sergeants or risk separation. This approach will provide a nonnegotiable career path and ensure that units maintain leadership stability and unit cohesion through experienced and well-prepared NCOs.

Another approach is to develop a mentoring and support program in conjunction with implementing the first sergeant talent alignment assessment program. This initiative positions future first sergeants in units based on talent, similar to assessment programs for command sergeant majors and battalion commanders (Army Talent Management Task Force, 2021). Such policy adjustments would align these transitions more closely with the established procedures for higher ranks, ensuring a more uniform and effective leadership succession plan across senior levels.



First Sgt. James L. Williams, outgoing first sergeant, Headquarters Support Company, U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa (SETAF-AF), reads the Charge of the NCO during Master Sgt. James D. Barton's lateral promotion ceremony at Caserma Del Din, Vicenza, Italy, Nov. 3, 2023. First sergeants carry heightened responsibilities. As companies' senior NCOs, they are the commanders' primary advisors on all matters concerning enlisted personnel. (U.S. Army photo by Cpl. Genesis Miranda)



First Sgt. Joseph B. Hays, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, stands in formation in Bemowo Piskie, Poland, Oct. 21, 2022. First sergeants bridge the gap between the enlisted population and officers. They exert influence through their official position and personal leadership, shaping options that affect units' day-to-day life and climate. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Matthew A. Foster)

Furthermore, by setting explicit criteria, the Army can retain talented personnel who might otherwise leave because of perceived limited opportunities. Master sergeants who opt out of first sergeant positions will create vacancies that enhance annual promotion rates. Applying these solutions through ethical lenses offers a deeper understanding.

### Rules

From the rules perspective, revised policy mandating master sergeants ineligible for sergeant major to serve as first sergeants adheres to a principle of fairness and duty. This approach aligns with the ethical principle of formal justice, which advocates for applying rules consistently and impartially.

Introducing a mandatory progression pathway and structured terms for first sergeant positions upholds Army internal regulations. It ensures Soldiers clearly understand their career paths.

### Outcomes

When evaluating the solution through the outcomes lens, the focus shifts to maximizing benefits for the most

significant number of people. This approach involves assessing the potential impacts of leadership transitions on unit effectiveness and Soldier welfare.

The goal is to design a system where transitioning master sergeants into first sergeants enhances unit cohesion, operational readiness, and the overall well-being of assigned personnel.

### Virtues

This perspective encourages master sergeants to embrace the role of first sergeant with a sense of duty and a commitment to their Soldiers' well-being. By fostering a culture where leaders actively serve and protect their formations, the Army promotes ethical leadership grounded in care, fairness, and a deep sense of responsibility.

Mentoring and support programs highlight the virtues of wisdom, guidance, and supportiveness, all essential qualities for effective leadership.

### Conclusion

The Army must implement guidelines that ensure master sergeants readily step into first sergeant roles

when called upon to do so. This approach will safeguard leadership integrity and succession, and promote fairness and duty fulfillment.

The Army's leadership structure is essential to its effectiveness and mission success. The roles of master sergeants and first sergeants are particularly critical. They bridge the gap between enlisted personnel and commissioned officers, guiding both operational execution and Soldier personal development. Addressing master sergeants' reluctance to transition

into first sergeant roles is vital for maintaining leadership continuity and unit cohesion.

By implementing clear guidelines mandating these transitions and supporting them with comprehensive mentoring and assessment programs, the Army can enhance its leadership pipeline, ensure unit stability, and foster a culture of committed and ethical leadership. These steps will optimize the Army's operational readiness and strengthen its foundational values, contributing to a more robust and resilient military force. ■

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