



Soldiers study a map during a situational training exercise at Fort Stewart, Georgia, Oct. 1, 2023. NCOs must collaborate, analyze information, and use critical thinking skills in the field to make informed decisions in dynamic and uncertain environments. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Benjamin Hale)

# NCOs and the Power of Critical Thinking

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**T**he role of Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) has expanded as warfare evolved. Moreover, NCOs will likely shoulder more responsibility in the future, according to an article published in the *NCO Journal* last year.

According to Sgt. Maj. Jason Abitua (2023), the era of NCOs being restricted to uniform standards and trivial tasks seems over. The current operational environment demands more from NCOs, and they must adapt to new expectations and responsibilities.

As the operational environment becomes increasingly complex and uncertain, NCOs must sharpen their critical thinking skills to effectively adapt, lead, develop solutions, and make informed decisions about coming challenges.

## Personal Experience

Serving as a first sergeant in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) region was an eye-opener for me. The challenging, humbling role required a quick grasp of concepts and systems different from those



I used as an infantryman.

My team consisted of Soldiers, airmen, contractors, and local-national workers. While my focus was on the company's health, welfare, discipline, and training, I found myself thinking out of the box to solve problems in an operational environment new to me.

I couldn't solely depend on my experience as an infantryman. Instead, I had to sharpen my critical thinking skills to adapt to the unique challenges we faced.

## Critical Thinking

Definitions of critical thinking vary, but many emphasize:

- Breaking a problem into its parts
- Recognizing and accounting for biases
- Collecting and assessing evidence
- Adjusting thinking based on what's learned
- Proposing a solution or achieving a more accurate understanding (Britannica, 2023)

Army doctrine emphasizes critical thinking for understanding changing situations and making justifiable conclusions (Headquarters, Department of the Army: ADP 6-22, 2019). In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, David Hitchcock (2022) states *critical thinking* is "careful goal-directed thinking."

Engaging in critical thinking requires an objective and open mind, an awareness of personal bias, and the determination to remain focused on finding feasible solutions.

## Importance of Critical Thinking Skills

NCOs are often on the front lines and make tactical decisions that significantly impact the mission. They must assess swiftly and then develop innovative solutions to complex problems.



Reading provides insights from multiple perspectives and illuminates new experiences. Knowledge and experience are finite, and NCOs can always learn more from others. Reading exposes you to different perspectives and exponentially expands your experiences. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Luis Saavedra)

By developing critical thinking skills, NCOs can better understand complicated situations and make informed choices – leading to successful outcomes. As warfare continues to change and become more complex, NCOs must be able to adapt and decide quickly and wisely (especially when faced with unprecedented challenges).

Planning for every possible scenario is difficult in today's rapidly evolving operational environment. That's why NCOs should exercise disciplined initiative (even when orders may no longer be fully applicable).

In a 2017 event at the Army and Navy Club in Washington, D.C., then-Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Mark A. Milley spoke about the future of warfare. He said subordinates must understand they have the freedom and empowerment to disobey specific orders or tasks if it helps them achieve a desired outcome (Lopez, 2017). Doing so requires a great deal of judgment, he noted.

NCOs will have to adapt to situations with limited information and resources and make decisions with more autonomy. Therefore, they must improve their critical thinking skills. Thinking critically and making informed decisions can be the difference between success and failure on the battlefield.

## How to Improve Critical Thinking Skills

How can NCOs sharpen their mental acuity? Here are four suggestions.

### Gain Perspective By Reading

Reading provides insights from multiple perspectives and illuminates new experiences. Knowledge and experience are finite, and NCOs can always learn more from others. Reading exposes you to different perspectives and exponentially expands your experiences.

As Harry S. Truman, the 33rd U.S. president, said, "Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers" (Truman Quotes, n.d.).

### Conversation Spurs Insight

Professional dialogue provides a deeper understanding of colleagues' perspectives and communication methods. By creating an open and nonjudgmental environment, NCOs can encourage discussions about important topics. These talks also help them examine their biases and become more self-aware.

### Education

Civilian education is crucial for developing critical thinking skills. In his *NCO Journal* article "Civilian Education and NCOs," Staff Sgt. Alan J. Brutus notes that some universities offer courses to develop these skills. However, it "is the culmination of all coursework that truly helps individuals think critically about a situation and make informed decisions to achieve desired results" (2019).

Writing plays a significant role in civilian education.



Soldiers discuss their next squad tactics movement at Cincu Training Area, Romania, Jan. 30, 2024. Professional dialogue provides a deeper understanding of colleagues' perspectives and communication methods. These conversations also help them examine their biases and become more self-aware. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Sgt. Andrew Mendoza)

Essay writing helps critical thinking by allowing writers to synthesize, hypothesize, and evaluate ideas.

### **Mistakes Are Growth Opportunities**

Learning from errors is essential. Mistakes are inevitable in today's rapidly changing environment. NCOs should reflect on blunders, learn from them, and adapt accordingly.

The key is to avoid letting mistakes become a habit or define your success. Instead, acknowledge your shortcomings, accept the inevitability of change, and continue learning and growing from your experiences.

### **Conclusion**

NCOs with strong critical thinking skills will be better equipped to analyze and evaluate complex issues, develop effective solutions, and solve problems more efficiently. A few ways NCOs can enhance their critical thinking skills are reading, professional dialogue, civilian education, and learning from mistakes.

Each approach allows NCOs to stay ahead of the curve and create a significant impact. The evolving nature of warfare demands that NCOs enhance their critical thinking skills to handle the changing operational environment. ■

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