



First Sgt. Richard McCormick kneels beside Pfc. Lathan McLeod and mentors him on properly clearing obstructions from a vehicle's tracks after concluding a weeklong external evaluation. Things that are important to NCOs revolve around people. Our responsibilities include training, readiness, mentoring and counseling, discipline, and communication. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Dustin Biven)

Leading by Example

How NCOs Can Align Their Time and Priorities

By Command Sgt. Maj. JoAnn Naumann

Special Operations Command

You say everything about what is important to you by how you spend your time. This is usually the last thing I tell NCOs in a mentoring session — frequently as they thank me for my time. It's the final lesson I want to leave with them.

You can talk about what you are going to do, but do you follow through? Words are easy, actions are hard. I want NCOs to walk away reflecting on how their time management communicates their values to Soldiers.

As NCOs, we take our priorities from the

commander. But how we implement those priorities is our responsibility. It isn't enough to talk about what is important. Soldiers will hear what you say, but they believe what you do.

In reality, most of us can easily fill the day with administrative requirements and busy work. But what if you dedicated time to what is truly important instead?

Aligning your time with priorities takes intentional effort. Schedules fill quickly with distractions, so here are a few strategies for using your time more intentionally.

Decide What Is Important

Things that are important to NCOs revolve around people. Our responsibilities include training, readiness, mentoring and counseling, discipline, and communication. Your focus will depend on your current role. Identify two or three major efforts that align with your values and goals in your current position.

These goals are significant and long term, but they require concrete actions today. Once you determine your goals, develop a list of actions for each. For example, if training is a priority, block time to prepare training and then time to execute. For leader development matters, schedule counseling sessions.

Thinking about a project that may take months to complete can be discouraging. By breaking it down, you give yourself actionable items you can complete.

Right now, my major objectives are talent management, mentorship, and communication. All of these require me to prepare and spend time with people. When planning your time, you must consider all parts of the goal. The time you spend with your Soldiers — whether training, mentoring, or communicating — will be more impactful if you are prepared.

Over time, your goals may change, or you may complete a major project. I recommend reviewing your objectives once a month. Assess how much time you dedicate to your objectives and the progress you make. Adjust your action steps or set new goals to align with current needs.

Evaluate How You Are Spending Your Time

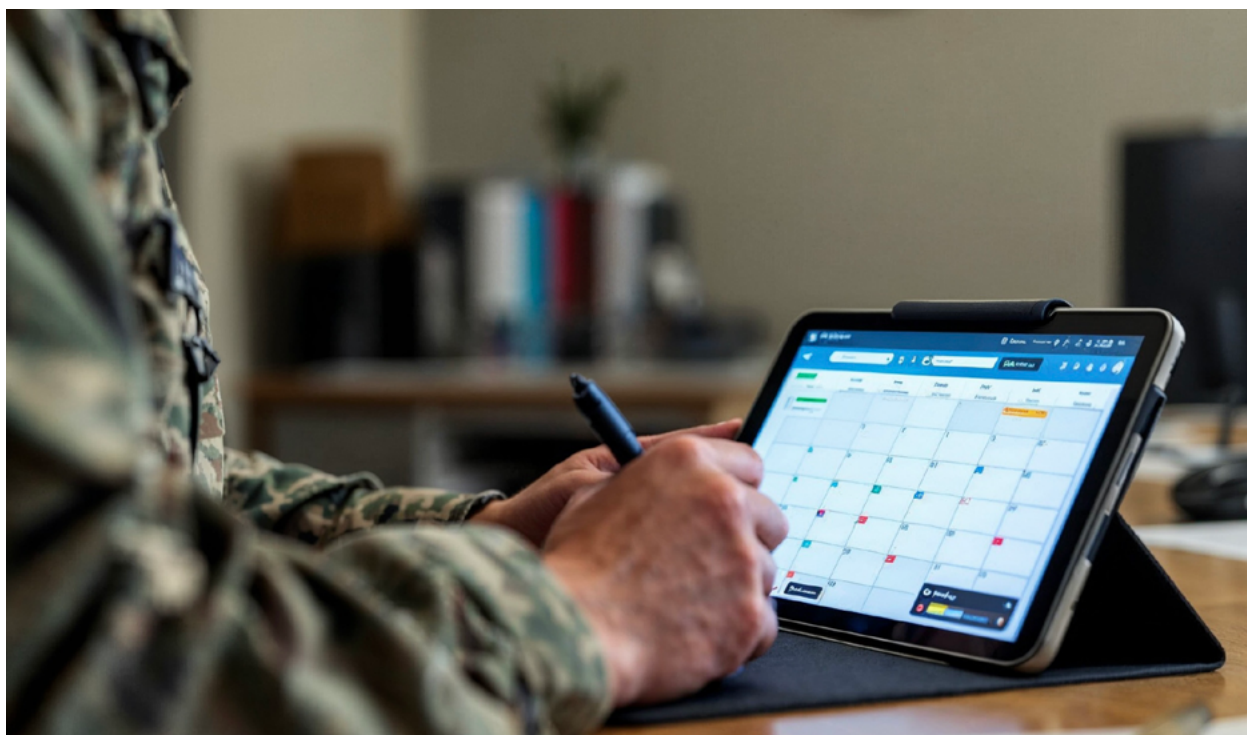
Once you determine the actions needed to reach your goals, look hard at your time. The first step is to look at how you spend it. I recommend all NCOs use a calendar to schedule their day. It often reveals unexpected time wasters.

Next, start scheduling your time strategically. The first thing that goes on my calendar is battle rhythm events. Then, add dedicated time for the activities and actions you identified within your priorities. Scheduling ensures these things happen.

I make time every week for mentorship and leader development sessions. I plan weeks out to talk to NCOES classes as an opportunity to communicate with Soldiers. I block chunks of time to work on projects or schedule office calls with stakeholders in those activities. The remaining time is for the smaller tasks that would otherwise consume the day.

The final and hardest step is learning to say no to obligations that don't align with what you value. Most of us overcommit to unnecessary activities. This could be attending a meeting that has no value to you or saying yes to every request. This was a tough lesson for me.

Often, saying no involves a conversation with someone senior to you about prioritizing multiple activities into limited time. Although saying no is challenging for most of us, it is critical if we want our time to represent what is important.



The first step in determining how to reach goals is to look at how time is spent. All NCOs should use calendars to schedule their days as this often reveals unexpected time wasters. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

Minimize Distractions

Despite over 20 years as an NCO, some days leave me exhausted — yet feeling like I accomplished nothing. The culprit? Distraction.

There's always another email to read or send, another last-minute task, or even a small item I can quickly mark off my to-do list. There will also be days when you genuinely must reschedule. Understanding the difference and taking a minute to decide between *urgent* and *important* will allow you to use your time best.

I minimize distractions by setting aside time for work on important projects. During this period, I turn off or minimize email and remove my phone from my workspace.

Designate specific times for quick tasks, so they don't interrupt important work. Finally, ensure you have the right space for your activity, whether that is a private room to mentor, a quiet space to read, or the proper site and equipment for training.

The final step to minimize distraction is to be present. I remind myself of this daily. It is easy to find yourself physically in one place but mentally in another. The solution may be as simple as moving to a quiet place to work on important projects. More often, it means paying attention to the people and the task before us. Being present is critical in the people tasks we complete daily — training, coaching, and counseling.

Be the Example

Perhaps the most important way we demonstrate what is important is by setting the example. In the case of how

you use your time, this applies in two ways. The first is by modeling the outcomes that you want others to achieve. If leader development is important, you also need to develop yourself. Your daily actions demonstrate a high personal and professional standard for others to achieve.



Some days leave even experienced NCOs exhausted — yet feeling like nothing was accomplished. There will always be another small item to quickly mark off a to-do list, but understanding the difference between *urgent* and *important* will allow you to use your time best. (U.S. Army National Guard Photo by Sgt. Wesley Riley)

Additionally, your example helps to build a culture that prioritizes using time effectively. This is another case where actions speak louder than words. Your consistent habits will form the expectations for your Soldiers. Focus on productivity rather than busyness and communicate what is important.

Finally, I encourage you to set this example both at work and at home by leaving at a reasonable hour and limiting after-hours communication. Be present for your family and friends during your time with them.

Conclusion

Time is our most valuable resource. We each get only 24 hours in a day. And, unlike other resources, time is nonrenewable. By taking a hard look at where you spend your time, you can

create a schedule aligned with what is important. This is not an exercise in perfection. There will still be days when you get sidetracked by an emergency or find yourself distracted by little things. But consistent efforts will pay off.

I challenge you to look at how you spend your time. Define what is important, make room for it in your schedule, and set the example. After all, Soldiers will hear what you say, but they will believe what you do. ■

Command Sgt. Maj. JoAnn Naumann is command sergeant major of U.S. Army Special Operations Command. She enlisted in the Army as a 35P, voice language analyst, in February 1996. She attended the College of William and Mary, majoring in American studies and government. Naumann's assignments include the 311th Military Intelligence Battalion, 344th Military Intelligence Battalion, and assignments to special mission units. She completed 14 deployments throughout U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). Naumann served as the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) J2 senior enlisted advisor and command sergeant major for the 15th Military Intelligence Battalion (Aerial Exploitation), JSOC Intelligence Brigade, and Special Operations Command Korea (SOCKOR).

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