



NCOs can increase their importance and involvement by taking a more active role in the planning process. It will broaden their understanding of the capabilities and warfighting functions to their left and right. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Gabriel Rivera)

# NCO Relevance: Beyond Just Your Presence

*By Sgt. Maj. Bradley J. Beavers Jr.*

1st Armored Division

**D**uring 1st Armored Division's (1AD) recent warfighter exercise (WFX) 25-01, Command Sgt. Maj. James L. Light, the division's senior enlisted leader, strongly emphasized that an NCO's presence doesn't guarantee meaningful involvement. His comments resonated with me, and I asked myself: *What are we NCOs doing to earn our place at the table?*

Many officers likely spent countless hours planning the WFX, meticulously addressing every detail. But how involved were their NCOs? My observations during the exercise suggest NCOs missed opportunities to integrate themselves into the planning process, which was evident

through their inability to describe the responsibilities and capabilities of adjacent staff sections and warfighter functions. In other words, they lacked a shared understanding beyond their immediate foxhole.

This deficiency makes one wonder: If NCOs don't actively engage in the planning process, how can we, as a corps, expect others to take our contributions seriously? Are we still relevant?

I believe we are. We can increase our importance and involvement by taking a more active role in the planning process, which will broaden our understanding of the capabilities and warfighting functions to our left and right.



## Warfighter Exercise Observations

During the warfighter exercise, I was sergeant major of the division tactical command post (DTAC), which serves several critical roles for the division. Two are providing command and control during key events and serving as an alternate command post (CP) if the main CP needs to displace.

This responsibility makes it essential for our small team of officers, NCOs, and Soldiers to be familiar with warfighter functions outside of their specialty in every aspect of the battle. However, that wasn't the case.

During the exercise, the staff issued a fragmentation order for a branch plan, and I tasked the NCOs in my section to read the order and present it to me during a standard seven-minute drill.

The results weren't what I expected. I discovered the NCOs worked in isolation and lacked a broad understanding of the order's intent or impact. They understood their responsibilities but couldn't explain how their role supported other warfighter functions (which, again, is critical for DTAC success).

Improved collaboration is the key to addressing this issue. From the beginning of the WFX progression, the 1AD commanding general (CG) and command sergeant major (CSM) emphasized a rarely seen level

of involvement from NCOs.

They encouraged them to participate in every aspect of the exercise to improve engagement and teamwork. This initiative echoed throughout the staff as the planning process includes NCOs in the 1AD. However, finding ways to enforce and leverage that involvement was the friction point. As the CSM stated, being present is not enough.

Although *The Noncommissioned Officer Guide* states that NCOs should "engage throughout the planning process" (Department of the Army [DA], 2020), this didn't happen. My observations suggest that NCOs focus on the execution phase of training events with marginal investment on the front end.

Contrary to this point, an officer informed the division CSM that NCOs were present at every planning board and seated beside every officer. This interaction seemed to support the CSM's comments. It isn't enough to be present. To be relevant and earn seats at the table, NCOs must be invested in the process and contribute more than just being there.

## Earning a Seat

At the WFX's conclusion, the CG stated his expectations for the staff to provide analysis through



How teams collaborate and leverage NCOs' experience can profoundly affect the staff's shared understanding and generate efficiencies. Three areas that represent easy wins to enhance staff NCO relevancy are relationship building, red team planning, and active involvement. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Randis Monroe)



publications to share knowledge across the formation. That is where I came in.

I believe a shift in how the team collaborates and leverages NCOs' experience can profoundly affect the staff's shared understanding and generate efficiencies. Three areas that represent easy wins to enhance 1AD staff NCO relevancy are relationship building, red team planning, and active involvement.

### Relationships

A planner reaching out to a functional cell for input shouldn't be tied to a single officer or point of contact. A potential indication of a unit where relationships and shared understanding are strong is when every member of the section can answer the call. This situation starts by building officer-NCO bonds.

One can describe these dynamic relationships in many ways. *Developing Leaders* (FM 6-22) contains a highly relevant example: "NCOs advise officers at all levels and are an important source of knowledge, experience, and discipline for all enlisted matters" (DA, 2022). The phrase "all enlisted matters" is broad, encompassing nearly every aspect of operations.

A common theme among Army leaders is that NCOs should be included in the planning process to add experience and perspective.

This idea derives from the notion that NCOs are older and more experienced than their officer counterparts, which some may see as degrading to the officer and enlisted corps. Officers possess experience, and NCOs have much more to offer than their age.

They should collaborate in every aspect of an operation, learning and growing together. Expertise is necessary regardless of rank. By fostering these relationships, officers empower NCOs and entrust them with more advanced tasks.

### Red Team Planning

A valuable opportunity for NCOs to enhance their understanding and demonstrate their worth is

by using their experience as red team participants during the planning process. According to the Department of the Army (2015), a red team member is someone trained and educated "to think critically and creatively" and who helps "commanders and staffs think from different perspectives" (p. 2-6).

While this role is typically associated with higher levels of command, it closely aligns with NCO responsibilities

outlined in doctrine. It can be implemented at every planning level.

This involvement empowers them to challenge the status quo, foster a shared understanding, and build trust as officers and NCOs collaboratively develop the plan. By engaging in this role, NCOs gain insights into their areas of responsibility and broaden their understanding of adjacent functions, enhancing their overall effectiveness.

### Active Involvement

Often, NCOs learn the intricacies of a mission during the operations order briefing — which is far too late. As the 1AD CSM emphasized, sitting at the table or standing next to your counterpart doesn't equate to being an active participant.

Delivering a brief prepared by someone else attempting to demonstrate

involvement can undermine trust, as stakeholders often anxiously wait to contribute. This situation can be tense and embarrassing for the briefer, further eroding confidence in the process. In the WFX, NCOs frequently worked in isolation on specific tasks, and this approach resulted in missing important injects that changed the plan.

There are many opportunities to enhance active involvement in our teams. For instance, several operational planning team meetings took place before each staff-planned training event. It's vital for officers to ensure these meetings include NCOs. Likewise, NCOs should take the initiative to be more than just ... there.

Additionally, combined arms rehearsals and participation in the military decision-making process



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Creating scenarios for NCOs to present alternative strategies during planning exercises will further promote a culture that values diverse perspectives. To ensure NCOs are actively involved from inception to execution, leaders should develop a standardized process for their contributions to the planning phases and incorporate training on effective briefing. (U.S. Army Reserve Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Jayson Rivera)

(MDMP) provide further avenues for engagement and collaboration. NCOs should approach every planning event, regardless of size, as a valuable opportunity to learn, develop, and contribute their insights. Leaders must deliberately include these solutions in their professional development plans.

### **Professional Development**

To enhance 1AD NCO relevance, the goal should be a professional development plan centered on shared understanding and proactive involvement. To foster stronger relationships between officers and NCOs, leadership must ensure meetings account for the attendance by both.

Holding a planning session during maintenance activities or other training events' execution phase may hinder NCO participation. To address this challenge, NCOs should prioritize their involvement by managing their schedules effectively, delegating tasks when necessary, and providing input on proposed timelines.

While professional development sessions are valuable, leaders must be careful not to limit participants by confining them to specific roles or responsibilities. It's

essential that operational planning training is accessible to both NCOs and officers. For example, before every WFX, units should send personnel to academic sessions that allow the entire staff to collaborate.

Additionally, establishing regular red team planning initiatives allows NCOs to actively participate in exercises and influence strategic decisions, enhancing their critical thinking skills.

Creating scenarios for NCOs to present alternative strategies during planning exercises will further promote a culture that values diverse perspectives. To ensure they are actively involved from inception to execution, leaders should develop a standardized process for their contributions to the planning phases and incorporate training on effective briefing techniques to prepare NCOs to present information confidently and improve outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

Division staff NCOs must be more proactive in the planning process and broaden their understanding of warfighting functions beyond their immediate areas of expertise. By doing so, they gain relevance and effectiveness.

Leaders can better leverage the NCO corps' experience and knowledge by focusing on relationship building — including red team tactics during planning efforts — and scheduling professional development to maximize NCO participation. 1AD empowers NCOs

and fosters a collaborative environment through command emphasis and support. It is time for the empowered to reciprocate that support.

We can regain relevance by taking initiative and bringing value to the table beyond just our presence. ■

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