



First Sgt. Blake Allen, Charlie “Wildcards” Company first sergeant, 2nd Battalion, 12th Regiment, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, speaks with Soldiers at the Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland, Nov. 20, 2024. First sergeants must know the answers to these urgent questions: *Who’s developing your team leaders? Your platoon sergeants? Are they doing it? How? And how do you know?* (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Trevor Wilson)

# Are You Developing Team Leaders?

## A Call to First Sergeants

*By Command Sgt. Maj. Randolph “DP” Delapena*

82nd Airborne Division

**I**n the summer of 1999, I was a 20-year-old sergeant fresh out of the Primary Leadership Development Course. I thought leadership meant learning my new role, enforcing standards, and knowing all three of my Soldiers — a task I once simplified into keeping a leader’s book and individual data card.

Looking back, I realize I was managing tasks and stumbling through discovery learning. I wasn’t necessarily leading.

As I matured in leadership, I recognized I lacked the individual development necessary to succeed in one of the hardest jobs in the Army: being a first-line sergeant.

Especially when a month prior, I was just one of the Soldiers. Suddenly, I was entrusted to lead them, and — like so many of us — I figured it out. But it took way too long.

That was more than 25 years ago. Today, I see sergeants struggle as I did. This leadership level is the hardest: New NCOs lack experience but must lead Soldiers who were buddies only a day before.

Today, the battlefield these Soldiers are preparing for is faster, deadlier, and more complex than it was for me. The stakes are too high to let them drift along and figure it out on their own.

As a first sergeant 17 years ago, I felt like I was

barely keeping my head above water when the brigade command sergeant major came to my office. Serving as a first sergeant was the first time I understood the two-levels-down leadership development method. The command sergeant major wasn't there to crush me — he was there to steer me and see how I was doing professionally and personally.

He coached me to think of ways to handle the situations that baffled me. He asked me how I was individually developing my squad leaders. That question flipped my perspective and made me question how — or even if — our platoon sergeants were developing the team leaders.

I was accustomed to mass NCO Professional Development (NCOPD) opportunities with all the NCOs for a PT session or a briefing — but not the power of one-on-one engagement. I realized my role wasn't just about being responsible for 100 Soldiers. It was about developing the 20 NCO leaders of our warfighters at the point of the spear.

This moment with the brigade command sergeant major opened my eyes and made me realize I could shape my company's most influential group of leaders: the

team leaders. Since that day, I've lived and preached the importance of individually developing our junior NCOs.

I'll ask you the same questions that changed my outlook: *Who's developing your team leaders? Your platoon sergeants? Are they doing it? How? And how do you know?*

If you don't have answers to these questions, your unit's most crucial combat leaders may already be behind. If you're not building sergeants, they're already drifting.

## The Real Job: Developing NCO Leaders

In the 82nd Airborne Division, the commanding general's priorities are crystal clear: The No. 1 job of a leader is to develop leaders. Managing training schedules, enforcing standards and discipline, and delivering individual training outcomes are part of it, but not everything. These are some of the means. Competent junior NCO leaders are the ends.

Our primary responsibility is to develop the next generation of those who lead our warfighters. The *Noncommissioned Officer Guide* states it clearly: "Leaders must be accountable and responsible for their subordinates' proficiency in conducting their wartime



First Sgt. Deric Hernandez, 101st Airborne Division, reads a safety brief at the Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, May 7, 2024. "Our primary responsibility is to develop the next generation of those who lead our warfighters," writes Command Sgt. Maj. Randolph "DP" Delapena. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Omar Joseph Sr.)





A Soldier discusses team movement with his squad team leader during a cold weather training exercise at the Glenciff Appalachian Trail in Warren, New Hampshire, Jan. 18, 2024. Realistic, standards-based training starts with team leaders. They're the ones enforcing standards at the eyeball-to-eyeball level. If you want results at the company-battery-troop level, it lives at the fire team. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Kelly Boyer)

mission" (Department of the Army [DA], 2020).

The real job is ensuring your NCOs can lead in combat when and where it matters most — not ensuring today's tasks get done. We've relied on the two-levels-down development model for too long, assuming platoon sergeants will handle their team leaders' development. However, after two years as a division command sergeant major, I observed that we weren't there yet.

Our current approach isn't enough and places an unrealistic expectation on our platoon sergeants. The daily business of running the platoon consumes their efforts, and many are senior staff sergeants who are fleeting up.

Platoon sergeants tend to work directly with the platoon leader and squad leaders and don't execute effective or consistent Leader Professional Development (LPD) programs at the platoon level. I'm working on this in our division. However, they still rely on company- and battalion-level programs and rarely spend one-on-one time with team leaders to discuss their performance and help their leadership development.

To be clear, this isn't an accusation. It's my observation after leading in every position in our NCO corps from team leader to division command sergeant major. I also know that when I was that platoon sergeant, I wasn't sitting

down with my team leaders one-on-one and developing them in that manner. Not because I chose not to but because I didn't understand that was one of my duties.

So, I'll ask the central question again: *Who's developing your team leaders?*

## Developing Leaders to Care for Warfighters

Realistic, standards-based training starts with team leaders. They're the ones enforcing standards at the eyeball-to-eyeball level. If you want results at the company-battery-troop level, it lives at the fire team. That is where our Soldiers are. Developing team leaders doesn't require more meetings or formal programs. For me, it was about ensuring consistent time, access, and accountability.

The most important resource we have is time. Giving team leaders your time is an essential investment. Team leaders hesitate to ask for help. They are junior NCOs eager to prove themselves worthy. They look up to you as the first sergeant, as the example of the NCO corps. Prioritize time to bring them in, develop them, and explain your and the commander's expectations.

Share your experiences with them. There are many ways to do this. One tool I used is a shadow program. They would follow me to meetings and events to get the bigger

picture of what happens at the company and battalion level. If we expect them to make tactical calls in combat, they'll get it right more often if they understand the commander's intent and how those at more senior levels make decisions.

Protect team leaders' access to you. Cut any red tape. Your door must be open if a team leader has a leadership issue. You must remain approachable. The squad leader and platoon sergeant can't be gatekeepers. We have an NCO Support channel, but the keyword is "support." Leadership isn't about control — it's about influence. The hungriest leaders will take every opportunity to learn if you give them access. And, for those who aren't necessarily hungry, you work to bring them with you.

The most critical part of development is holding your team leaders accountable for their teams' training and lethality as well as all the things for which their Soldiers are responsible: weapons maintenance and qualification, fitness levels, expertise in their battle drills, their health and welfare, and their conduct on and off duty. Team leaders must own *all* of that.

If you are not their mentor, who is? *Developing Leaders* (FM 6-22) notes "mutual trust and respect" form the basis for mentorship (DA, 2022). Build this trust and respect by backing Soldiers up when they operate with discipline, energy, and initiative. Praise them when they excel. Coach immediately when they wobble. Do it right and respectfully, and retrain them when they miss the target.

Focused minutes of conversation in the field — or visits to their workplace to sit down and check on them — often build more trust and respect than formal counseling sessions.

### **The Line Between Strong and Weak Leadership**

A well-trained and disciplined team leader drives standards without crushing morale. In the 82nd Airborne Division, the commanding general's All American Azimuth emphasizes that leaders own their organizations' culture. This privilege requires all of us to do the right things the right way.

Throughout my career, I've witnessed and corrected junior NCOs who mistake discipline for rigid control. Others confuse toughness with intimidation. Weak leaders

rule with fear. Strong leaders set the example and then enforce standards with confidence. Weak leaders think breaking Soldiers down makes them tougher. Strong leaders build teams through trust and shared hardship.

Early investment in developing our team leaders ensures they understand the link between discipline and leadership. Team leaders must train hard, enforce standards, and prepare for the most challenging day of ground combat. However, they also must teach, build trust, develop their Soldiers, and lead with confidence rather than insecurity. This outcome only happens at scale if senior NCOs invest time in building them. We fail if we rely on institutional development to prepare our team leaders for their hardest days.

### **The Fight is Coming — Are They Ready?**

These days, I don't get to mentor too many team

leaders. But I spend time with them during airborne operations, field training exercises, and small unit live fires. From what I see, today's team leaders aren't much different from those during my time as a first sergeant. Walking around the footprint or field and meeting paratroopers, I recognize the same desire to succeed and the same motivation to be the best. Some aspects of leading Gen Z have changed, but most have not.

What won't change is that we don't get to choose when the next fight happens. When it does, we certainly don't want unprepared team leaders making decisions when it counts the most and the round leaves the barrel. You get the team leaders

you build, not the ones you want.

I'll ask one last time: *Who's developing your team leaders?* If you don't have an answer, fix that now. Get in front of them, teach them, share yourself, and give them your time. Hold them accountable. Show them how to lead beyond the daily tasks.

The history of combat teaches us that Soldiers don't magically rise to the occasion when the fight comes. They resort to the level of their training and trust in their leaders. Ensure your team leaders' training and development are good enough for their first gunfight at night.

This is our obligation. There are no do-overs. ■



A team leader with the Puerto Rico Army National Guard provides guidance during a live fire exercise at the Camp Santiago Joint Training Center, Salinas, Puerto Rico, Aug. 23, 2024. The most critical part of development is holding your team leaders accountable for their teams' training and lethality as well as all the things for which their Soldiers are responsible: weapons maintenance and qualification, fitness levels, expertise in their battle drills, their health and welfare, and their conduct on and off duty. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Agustín Montañez)





First Sgt. Daniel Fields (right), Light Fighter School, Fort Drum, New York, teaches methods to safely move on a fixed rope in high-angle terrain near Smolyan, Bulgaria, Sep. 16, 2023. Team leaders must train hard, enforce standards, and prepare for the most challenging day of ground combat. However, they also must teach, build trust, develop their Soldiers, and lead with confidence rather than insecurity. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Jaidon Novinska)

---

## References

Department of the Army. (2020). *The noncommissioned officer guide* (TC 7-22.7). <https://www.ncolcoe.army.mil/Portals/71/publications/ref/Army-NCO-Guide-2020.pdf>

Department of the Army (2022). *FM 6-22: Developing Leaders*. [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/ARN43044-FM\\_6-22-002-WEB-5.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN43044-FM_6-22-002-WEB-5.pdf)

---

**Command Sgt. Maj. Randolph “DP” Delapena** serves as senior enlisted advisor to the commanding general of the 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He joined the Army in 1996 as a combat engineer and has served in a variety of leadership positions from team leader, squad leader, drill sergeant, platoon sergeant, first sergeant, and ROTC senior military instructor to battalion command sergeant major. Delapena deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Inherent Resolve and holds a bachelor’s degree in history from Excelsior College, where he graduated cum laude.

---

**NCO JOURNAL**

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>  
<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

