



Then Sgt. 1st Class Nicole B. Moates (center) received the Commandant's List award during the Air Force Senior Noncommissioned Officer (SNCO) Advanced Leaders Experience (ALE) course on graduation day at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. The course develops productive leaders and could be readily adapted for the Army's NCO PME. (Photo courtesy of author)

# Lessons from Air Force PME

*By Master Sgt. Nicole B. Moates*

Sergeants Major Course, Class 75

**I**n the spring of 2019, I was completing my third year as a drill sergeant — scheduled to deploy to Iraq on a tasker in a matter of weeks — and I was exhausted. My commander presented me with an opportunity to apply for the Air Force Senior Noncommissioned Officer (SNCO) Advanced Leaders Experience (ALE), and he fought tooth and nail to ensure I could attend.

At that time, ALE was under review for accreditation as an equivalent for the Army's Master Leaders Course (MLC). The ALE course included international students and instructors, alongside participants from all sister services, and followed the Air Force Professional Military Education (PME) program. My selection and attendance to the Air Force SNCO ALE was a transformational experience in my career that had real and lasting impacts

on me and my leadership style.

When I arrived at the ALE program at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, I was still wearing my assigned drill sergeant bush hat and carrying a significant chip on my shoulder. I walked in with a closed mind and superior attitude, wondering what the Air Force could possibly teach me about leading.

It quickly became clear that what the Army considered leading and what the Air Force did were vastly different. Neither was right or wrong.

The Air Force's conception closely aligned with what I would define as *management*. The organization demonstrated a commitment to personal and professional development that, in my experience, was not as prevalent in the Army. Writing in the online

journal *Wild Blue Yonder*, Air Force captain and psychologist Keith Happawana describes the Air Force approach to education this way:

*“Professional Military Education (PME) relies upon personality assessment to portray accurate depictions of personality traits so that leaders can deepen their understanding of their own psychological tendencies, strengths, and weaknesses. Framed differently, PME relies upon personality assessment and related discussion to further develop leaders.”*  
(Happawana, 2021, para 1)

## Learning About Ourselves

Over the first week, students completed assessments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the International Personality Item Pool Representation. The ALE curriculum required students to take multiple personality and learning evaluations and place the results on their nameplates.

This information allowed others to determine how they would approach each student with insights, questions, and requests. The Air Force students were

aware of their categorizations. This approach was normal in all their PME courses, and I was the slowest to adapt to it and understand its purpose.

It was not until well into the course that I realized these categorizations determined team assignments. This process allowed for the development of each student’s strengths and weaknesses. The personality types were *agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, extraversion, and openness*, which apply to all of us to varying degrees.

It eventually became evident that grouping all students with the “conscientious” trait together resulted in efficient work but did not foster team building or progress beyond meeting basic requirements. Similarly, placing all “agreeable” students in one group created a positive environment but did not necessarily lead to innovative ideas.

It became clear that a diverse mix of personalities was essential for maximizing group productivity and achieving comprehensive outcomes or positive group work results.

## Call to Action

Young leaders interested in becoming more self-aware in their leadership style can take steps to develop



Then Sgt. 1st Class Nicole B. Moates (top row, third from the left) stands with her classmates, Class 2019-D Flight 10, Air Force SNCO ALE course, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. The ALE course included international students and instructors, alongside participants from all sister services, and followed the Air Force Professional Military Education (PME) program. (Photo courtesy of author)

and improve themselves. First, embrace personality assessments, such as those found in the Athena Career Long Assessments, which the *Military Review* notes “supports leader development by providing assessments to enhance developmental insight and planning as leaders progress throughout their careers” (Beaty et al., 2023). Others include the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and tests derived from it (<https://www.truity.com/view/tests/personality-tests-workplace>).

These assessments can provide valuable confidential insights into our strengths, weaknesses, and interactions with others. Young leaders can use these results in their Individual Development Plans or their personal leadership journey to adapt their approach to leadership and teamwork.

Another step is prioritizing self-awareness by making a habit of self-reflection. Regularly evaluate your actions, decisions, and leadership styles. Understanding your initial reaction and tendencies to stressful situations can significantly enhance your effectiveness as a leader.

Next, engage in continuous learning. Read on a broad variety of topics, specifically memoirs from respected and admired leaders. For example, Ulysses S. Grant’s writings inspired a Soldier’s reflections earlier in the *NCO Journal* (Crosby, 2024).

Other books, such as *Legacy* by James Kerr, offer valuable lessons in leadership and self-awareness. Leaders should seek resources that challenge and expand their understanding of effective leadership.

Finally, lead by example. Young leaders should demonstrate the self-awareness and emotional intelligence they want to see in their team. They should be open about their growth and learning journey and

should encourage such transparency in others. By taking these steps, young leaders can become more self-aware and effective, leading to stronger, more cohesive teams and better mission outcomes.

## Conclusion

In my 22 years of service in the Army and throughout my Professional Military Education (PME) experiences, I was never asked to identify my learning style, communication approach, or thinking style. The Army placed me in groups based upon proximity or alphabetically and expected us all to simply *make it work* to varying degrees of success.

In contrast, the Air Force considered each person and matched them with groups based on the most likely positive outcome for the mission and group dynamics. This approach to *people first and mission always* seemed far more in-depth. The strategy seemed likely to succeed long-term and lead to peaceful team development.

This development and growth within the NCO corps would benefit the Army. The organization hasn’t prioritized a sense of self-assessment and personal reflection within their leaders, which the Air Force strives to standardize.

While the Army has integrated some assessments in recent years at the sergeant major level, the integration at the Basic Leader Course could develop an entire generation of self-aware leaders.

Introducing young Soldiers to emotional intelligence and management skills early in their careers could cultivate a more cohesive and effective workforce. This program, already in place and tested through the Air Force’s PME, develops productive leaders and could be readily adapted for the Army’s NCO PME. ■



Then Sgt. 1st Class Nicole B. Moates (right) and Air Force Master Sgt. Shallon Richards, her Class 2019-D Flight 10 classmate, pose for a photo on SNCO ALE course graduation day at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. Moates’ selection and attendance was a transformational experience in her career that had real and lasting impacts on her and her leadership style. (Photo courtesy of author)

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