



Junior NCOs attend a leader professional development (LPD) event designed to enhance leadership skills and develop future leaders. The Army's point-based system doesn't evaluate essential leadership skills Soldiers need early in their careers. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class John Miller)

Beyond Points

Reevaluating Army Leader Development

By Staff Sgt. Austin Baker

NCO Academy, Charlie Branch, Advanced Leaders Course 003-25

The Army has been searching for effective leaders to strengthen the force for years. Does a high physical fitness score produce a great leader? Is the Soldier who has been to every Army school destined to lead from the front? Many Soldiers ask these questions as they scratch and claw for any possible promotion point to climb the ranks in the Army's point-based promotion structure.

The system is ineffective when selecting true leaders. The approach prioritizes organizational metrics over demonstrated leadership attributes, creates unfair promotion opportunities due to unequal access to schools, and fails to evaluate leadership potential at the lowest level — ultimately depleting future Army leader competency.

A fundamental shift is needed in the Army's

promotion system to prioritize holistic leadership assessments, provide equal access to training, and recognize leadership potential at all levels, ensuring a more competent and capable NCO corps.

Let's explore the challenges of the current system and consider ways to create a more equitable and comprehensive approach to assessing leadership in the Army.

Organizational Metrics

Promotion points provide a measurable way to assess a Soldier's skills, conduct, and performance. At the same time, qualities such as adaptability, decision-making, and the capacity to inspire others remain

overlooked. The problem stems from the Army's failure to assess leadership potential effectively.

One common criticism is that the system prioritizes specific characteristics, like physical fitness, over actual leadership abilities. (Consider, for example, the saying, "You can only be a leader if you can run fast.") These qualities make a great individual Soldier and are critical for personal development and operational effectiveness. However, an individual's speed doesn't correlate with their decision-making ability.

Suppose Soldiers aren't allowed to lead or demonstrate their leadership capabilities. In that case, it's impossible to evaluate their qualifications accurately. This creates frustration and a sense of inequity among those who feel they have the necessary skills but lack the right opportunities to demonstrate them. As a result, some competent individuals may be overlooked or unfairly assessed.

According to a RAND Corporation study, the Army should consider adjusting the promotion point distribution to achieve desired leadership attributes. The change could help find Soldiers with leadership potential (Wenger et al., 2018). Such potential must be assessed through a broader lens, allowing Soldiers to demonstrate their capabilities differently — not just in tests or evaluations that fail to fully capture effective Army leadership.

Unfair Access to Career-Benefiting Schools

Another flaw in the Army's promotion system is unfair access to career-benefiting schools. Those assigned to units with more funding and resources have more opportunities to attend courses like Airborne School. Even when their performance is on par with or better than their peers, troops without access to these schools are less likely to be promoted than those with it.

This disparity is often related to factors out of Soldiers' control, like unit budgets. Army Regulation 350-1, which describes training management procedures, further emphasizes the discrepancy. However, it doesn't include steps to guarantee that every unit has equal access to training opportunities (DA, 2025).

Moreover, Soldiers in units with more administrative initiative or significant funding can access possibilities that increase their chances of advancement. Promotions focus more on systemic inequalities than leadership ability and merit.

According to the RAND Corporation, the Army's capacity to recognize and develop future leaders is weakened by inconsistent training opportunities. It promotes Soldiers based on availability rather than

demonstrated competence and capability (Wenger et al., 2018).

Suppose there is no system to level the playing field regardless of unit affiliation. This disparity not only demoralizes Soldiers who cannot attend these schools but also risks promoting individuals based on availability rather than aptitude. In that case, the Army ultimately risks reinforcing inequality, hindering its mission to promote the most qualified and competent leaders.

Leadership at the Lowest Level

The Army's point-based system doesn't evaluate essential leadership skills Soldiers acquire early in their careers. Junior Soldiers are critical to carrying out the Army's mission. Soldiers' first leadership roles begin in the early stages of their career, with the Army laying out the framework as soon as they begin Basic Combat Training.

Marking the start of their journey in guiding others requires teamwork, emotional intelligence, and the ability to inspire. It is instilled in us that effective leaders prioritize the group's success over individual achievements. "There is no I in team" emphasizes the idea, for example. A promotion system that heavily focuses on individual metrics may fail to recognize Soldiers who excel in fostering teamwork and building cohesive units.

According to *Stars and Stripes*, the Army doesn't start considering a Soldier's demonstrated leadership as part of the promotion process until a Soldier is promoted to sergeant first class and higher, even if unit commanders assess leadership potential when nominating junior Soldiers for promotion (Wenger et al., 2018). The Army must



If Soldiers aren't allowed to lead or demonstrate their leadership capabilities, it's impossible to evaluate their qualifications accurately. This situation creates frustration and a sense of unfairness among those who feel they have necessary skills but no opportunity to demonstrate them. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Jose Lora)



The Army's promotion point system is an essential factor in assessing Soldiers. However, it must balance the importance of individual skills with the need to evaluate leadership potential. While physical fitness, education, and technical proficiency are critical tests, authentic leadership is about inspiring and guiding others toward a common goal. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Seth Aaron)

conduct a more comprehensive evaluation of leadership potential to develop a more equal promotion system.

Such an approach could entail assessing junior Soldiers' aptitude for working in groups, their capacity to guide and develop others, and their emotional intelligence in managing challenging leadership situations. A more realistic troop qualifications evaluation would be possible if they were given opportunities to show off their leadership skills through command roles, group projects, or real-world situations.

The Army's promotion point system is an essential factor in assessing Soldiers. However, it must balance the importance of individual skills with the need to evaluate leadership potential. While physical fitness, education, and technical proficiency are critical tests, authentic leadership is about inspiring and guiding others toward a common goal.

Conclusion

The Army's promotion system is inadequate for identifying and recognizing genuine leadership potential. It unjustly neglects Soldiers who are strong at cooperation, mentorship, and unit cohesion by placing a higher value on quantifiable indicators than on proven leadership qualities. Leadership is developed early in Soldiers' careers, and it's crucial to assess and foster these attributes.

The promotion system must adopt a more holistic approach that values leadership attributes alongside individual performance. This includes equal access to career-enhancing opportunities, comprehensive evaluations of leadership skills, and a shift in focus toward recognizing and developing leaders at all ranks. By addressing these gaps, the Army can build a more potent force capable of meeting today's and tomorrow's challenges. ■

References

Department of the Army. (2025). *Army training and leader development* (AR 350-1). https://armypubs.army.mil/ProductMaps/PubForm/Details.aspx?PUB_ID=1030846

Wenger, J., O'Connell, C., Constant, L., & Lohn, A. (2018, October 4). *The Value of Experience in the Enlisted Force*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2211.html

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.

