



Command Sgt. Maj. Alex Kupratty, 4th Infantry Division and Fort Carson command sergeant major, speaks to Soldiers April 28, 2025, at Fort Carson, Colorado. Developing leaders is an ongoing process that leverages institutional, operational, and self-development domains to create holistic leaders capable of addressing the challenges presented by an ever-changing operational environment. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Ondirae Abdullah-Robinson)

# Whose Job Is It Anyway?

## Understanding and Applying All Learning Domains

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**T**hroughout my 29-year career, I have spoken to organizational leaders about the responsibility of developing Army leaders. To my surprise, the prevailing opinion remains that the institutional domain is solely responsible for this significant task. Comments such as “Basic Leader Course (BLC) is failing to develop good team leaders” or “Senior Leader Course (SLC) sent me a less-than-ideal platoon sergeant back” are common.

I admit, I once shared this viewpoint. However, I realized this perspective is incorrect.

During a recent solution summit with platoon- and company-level leaders, I encountered their dissatisfaction with NCOs’ experience and the lack of technical expertise. What’s more, the leaders thought we promote too fast, before NCOs are ready to assume their next level of responsibility. As a result, they provided recommendations on institutional domain improvements.

This trend has continued. I’ve heard similar feedback during my time in special operations, where the Ranger Assessment and Selection Program (RASP) cadre develops

new Rangers. The force was consistently interested in young Rangers acquiring a comprehensive list of qualifications and certifications that parent units could further develop.

The belief that these programs, professional military education (PME), and the broader institutional domain have adequate time to cultivate the ideal athlete, warfighter, and leader for our formations is profoundly inaccurate.

So, whose job is it anyway? Serving for the past 29 years has demonstrated that developing leaders isn't solely the responsibility of institutional domains. It's an ongoing process that necessitates leveraging both operational and self-development domains to create holistic leaders capable of addressing the challenges presented by an ever-changing operational environment.

### Challenging the Institutional Myth

The misconception that the institutional domain (schools and PME) is solely responsible for Army leader development is incorrect and hinders leader readiness. Criticisms aimed at PME institutions for perceived shortcomings in new leaders often overlook the vital roles of the operational and self-development domains.

This attitude creates unrealistic expectations, assuming classroom instruction can fully prepare leaders for real-world challenges. Neglecting practical experience, mentorship, and individual initiative

impedes developing effective and adaptable leaders.

This overreliance on the institutional domain devalues on-the-job training and mentorship, potentially neglecting these crucial development aspects. It also fosters a "check-the-box" mentality, prioritizing PME completion over practical application and mastery.

Consequently, the system risks producing leaders strong in theory but lacking the practical skills, adaptability, and critical thinking needed to lead Soldiers in complex and unpredictable environments. Ultimately, this undermines the Army's ability to cultivate well-rounded, resilient, and innovative leaders for the 21st century.

Effective leader development requires shared responsibility across the institutional, operational, and self-development domains. The institutional domain provides foundational knowledge, skills, and values through formal education and PME.

The operational domain offers real-world application, fostering practical experience, mentorship, and unit expertise.

The self-development domain empowers individuals to proactively enhance their capabilities through continuous learning and initiative. A synergistic integration of these domains cultivates agile, adaptable, and resilient leaders capable of thriving in modern warfare and leading Soldiers to mission success.



Overreliance on the institutional domain devalues on-the-job training and mentorship, potentially neglecting them. It also fosters a "check-the-box" mentality, prioritizing professional military education (PME) completion over practical application and mastery. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Adrian Greenwood)



## The 3 Domains of Leader Development

**Institutional Domain:** This domain encompasses formal education and training programs, such as PME and specialized courses. It provides Soldiers with the foundational knowledge, skills, and values necessary for effective leadership and professional growth.

**Operational Domain:** This domain focuses on real-world assignments, on-the-job training, and mentorship within operational units. It builds upon the foundations established in the institutional domain by providing practical experience, refining skills, and fostering adaptability in dynamic environments.

**Self-Development Domain:** This domain emphasizes individual initiative and responsibility for continuous learning and personal growth. It involves self-directed learning, reflection on experiences, and the pursuit of opportunities to enhance knowledge, skills, and abilities beyond formal training and assigned duties.

### Institutional vs. Operational Development

Institutional and operational development are distinct but interconnected elements vital to Soldiers' capabilities and leadership potential. Institutional development, including formal schooling and PME, provides the foundational knowledge, skills, and doctrine necessary for effective Army service.

This structured environment builds fluid intelligence — the ability to reason, problem-solve, and adapt. New Soldiers rely on this fluid intelligence to absorb information and apply it in training and initial assignments.

As Soldiers progress, emphasis shifts to operational development. This encompasses real-world assignments, on-the-job training, and mentorship, building upon the institutional foundation and fostering crystallized intelligence.

Crystallized intelligence is the accumulation of knowledge and experience. Experienced Soldiers use this wisdom to make sound judgments, anticipate challenges, and lead effectively. The operational domain tests and refines institutional knowledge, transforming it into practical expertise.

The interplay of fluid and crystallized intelligence is critical. New Soldiers leverage fluid intelligence to learn institutional concepts quickly. Operational experience then crystallizes this knowledge.

Experienced Soldiers use crystallized intelligence to mentor juniors, solve problems, and adapt. However, continuous learning is essential to maintaining fluid intelligence and adapting to new technologies.

Institutional development fosters fluid intelligence via new concepts and problem-solving. Operational development fosters crystallized intelligence by applying concepts and learning from experience. A successful career requires integrating both, ensuring Soldiers possess both foundational knowledge and practical expertise.

Ultimately, integrating institutional and operational development creates adaptable, resourceful, and decisive leaders. The institutional domain ignites fluid intelligence. The operational domain transforms it into crystallized intelligence and expertise. This continuous cycle ensures Army leaders remain ready to meet evolving challenges.



The Ranger Assessment and Selection Program (RASP) exemplifies how operational units augment institutional training to cultivate elite Soldiers. The program tests physical and mental resilience, tactical proficiency, and leadership potential in a demanding and realistic operational environment. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Austin Berner)

### Integrating Domains Over an Army Career

Operational units are vital in building upon institutional training to develop well-rounded leaders capable of meeting specific environmental challenges. RASP exemplifies how operational units augment institutional training to cultivate elite Soldiers.

While initial entry training and Airborne School provide basic Soldiering skills and airborne qualifications, RASP exceeds these foundational elements. The program rigorously tests physical and mental resilience, tactical proficiency, and leadership potential in a demanding and realistic operational environment.

RASP emphasizes practical application and adaptation, forcing candidates to apply basic

skills in complex and evolving scenarios. They learn to navigate challenging terrain, conduct reconnaissance, and execute small-unit tactics under pressure.

The program stresses critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making, skills only partially developed in institutional settings. RASP fosters leadership through practical exercises wherein candidates lead and are evaluated on their ability to motivate and inspire peers under duress. This assessment identifies those with adaptability, resilience, and leadership qualities necessary for a Ranger unit, weeding out those with only theoretical knowledge.

RASP's success demonstrates why it's important for operational units to build upon institutional training. Initial entry training and schools provide building blocks, but the



Effective leadership development is a continuous process, not a one-time event, and it requires a concerted effort from leaders at all levels to cultivate the skills and character necessary for success. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Antony S. Lee)

operational environment forges well-rounded leaders.

RASP's demanding curriculum, realistic training, and emphasis on application create physically and technically proficient Soldiers who are also mentally tough, adaptable, and capable of leading in challenging circumstances.

This model underscores why operational units need to invest in continuous Soldier development, augmenting institutional training with rigorous practical experiences and mentorship to cultivate future Army leaders.

### **Addressing Common Misconceptions**

Attributing leadership gaps solely to institutional failures is a common but inaccurate assessment. While shortcomings in training programs and PME can contribute to deficiencies, it's an oversimplification to place the entire burden on the institutional domain. This perspective ignores the impact of unit-level leadership and the opportunities for growth afforded by challenging operational assignments.

Effective leadership development is a continuous process, not a one-time event. It requires a concerted effort from leaders at all levels to cultivate the skills and character necessary for success. To solely blame the schoolhouse is to abdicate responsibility for the daily mentorship, coaching, and development that should occur within every unit.

Instead of solely focusing on perceived institutional

failures, the Army must emphasize the critical role of unit-level leaders in fostering ongoing development. Leaders at the company, battalion, and brigade levels are directly responsible for creating a climate that encourages continuous learning, provides opportunities for practical application, and cultivates a culture of mentorship.

Challenging operational assignments, whether during training exercises or real-world deployments, offer invaluable opportunities for Soldiers to test their skills, develop resilience, and hone their leadership abilities.

By actively developing their subordinates and leveraging opportunities presented by operational assignments, unit-level leaders can effectively bridge the gap between institutional learning and real-world application, ultimately producing well-rounded and highly capable leaders.

While institutional training provides a foundational base of knowledge and skills, rapid promotion and a lack of operational mentorship can significantly undermine its effectiveness.

Soldiers who are promoted too quickly, without sufficient experience in progressively challenging roles, may lack the practical judgment and tactical acumen necessary to lead effectively.

They may possess theoretical knowledge gained through PME, but without the benefit of applying that knowledge in real-world scenarios under the guidance of experienced leaders, they're ill-prepared to navigate the complexities of



command and make sound decisions under pressure.

Such premature advancement can lead to situations where individuals are placed in positions of authority without the necessary experience to effectively exercise it. They ultimately jeopardize mission success and their Soldiers' well-being.

Furthermore, a lack of robust operational mentorship intensifies the challenges posed by rapid promotion. Mentorship provides junior leaders with invaluable guidance, feedback, and support from more experienced individuals who have navigated similar challenges.

Mentors can share their insights, offer practical advice, and help junior leaders develop the critical thinking skills and decision-making abilities necessary to succeed. Without this mentorship, junior leaders must navigate the complexities of command alone, often repeating past mistakes and failing to realize their potential.

The combination of rapid promotion and a lack of mentorship creates a recipe for leader unpreparedness, regardless of the quality of institutional training received. A concerted effort to provide meaningful mentorship and ensure that promotions are based on demonstrated competence and experience is crucial for cultivating a force of ready and effective leaders.

## Recommendations for a Holistic Approach

To cultivate a holistic approach to leader development, the Army must implement actionable steps that reinforce the interconnectedness of the institutional, operational, and self-development domains.

First, prioritize mentorship and developmental counseling in operational units. This requires actively promoting mentorship programs, providing dedicated time for mentorship activities, and recognizing and rewarding leaders who excel as mentors.

Units should implement structured developmental counseling programs that go beyond routine performance evaluations, focusing on identifying individual strengths and weaknesses, setting clear developmental goals, and providing resources and support to achieve those goals.

Leaders should be held accountable for their subordinates' development, with their own performance evaluations reflecting their effectiveness as mentors and talent cultivators.

Second, foster a culture that views operational assignments as critical development opportunities, not just job requirements. This requires a deliberate effort to align assignment policies with developmental goals.

Leaders should be assigned to positions that challenge them and provide growth opportunities, even if it means stepping out of their comfort zones. Units should create a learning environment that sees mistakes as improvement opportunities, and where Soldiers are encouraged to take risks and innovate. After-action reviews (AARs) should be used to analyze mission performance and identify individual and collective learning points, fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Finally, balance institutional improvements with operational accountability for leader growth. While



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Metrics should be incorporated into unit evaluations and used to identify best practices that can be shared across the force. By balancing institutional improvements with operational accountability, the Army can ensure that leader development is a shared responsibility, fostering a culture of continuous growth and ensuring that Soldiers are prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century. (U.S. Army photo by Audrey Chappell)

continuously improving institutional training programs is essential, it's equally important to hold operational units accountable for their Soldiers' ongoing development.

This approach requires developing metrics to assess leader development in operational units, such as the percentage of Soldiers participating in mentorship programs, the frequency of developmental counseling sessions, and the progress made toward individual developmental goals.

Unit evaluations should incorporate these metrics to identify best practices shareable across the force. By balancing institutional improvements with operational accountability, the Army can ensure that leader development is a shared responsibility, fostering a culture of continuous growth and ensuring that Soldiers are prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

## Conclusion

Effective leader development in the Army is not a static achievement but a continuous, shared process demanding a fundamental cultural shift. The prevailing

attitude of relying solely on institutional training to forge leaders must be discarded.

Instead, the Army must embrace a holistic approach where every leader, at every level, takes ownership of developing the next generation. This requires actively leveraging both the foundational knowledge provided by the institutional domain and the practical experience gained in the operational domain.

Meaningful mentorship, developmental counseling, and challenging operational assignments — viewed as critical growth opportunities — are paramount. Furthermore, fostering a culture that emphasizes self-development throughout an Army career empowers Soldiers to proactively enhance their capabilities and adapt to evolving challenges.

By embracing this shared responsibility and prioritizing continuous growth, the Army can cultivate agile, adaptable, and resilient leaders prepared to meet the demands of the 21st century and ensure mission success. ■

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**Command Sgt. Maj. Alexander Kupratty** enlisted in the Army in 1996 after a year at the Virginia Military Institute and was immediately assigned to the 75th Ranger Regiment. He spent most of the next 20 years of his military career there, culminating in the position of command sergeant major of the Second Ranger Battalion. He relinquished responsibility as command sergeant major of the 4th Infantry Division in June and took on duties as Headquarters, Department of the Army, G-3/5/7 Directorate Sergeant Major.

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