



Competence is more than a watchword — it is the foundation of readiness. NCOs grounded in competence are technically and tactically proficient, self-aware of their duties and responsibilities, and focused on building a ready force. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Seth Cohen)

Competence is My Watchword

The Key to Being Ready

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Introduction

Finding a topic relevant to all Army NCO leaders is challenging. We're a big team with incredible differences and specialties. Still, as I sat down to write this article, I wanted to find a common bond, and eventually, it struck me: *competence*. Soldiers' primary trainers are NCOs, and that role requires competence, no matter the specialty.

After nearly 30 years in the Army, I have plenty of examples of NCO-based competence. However,

an early memory of a corporal still influences me today as a command sergeant major. Why? Because competence was his watchword.

The Competent Corporal

During my time with the 82nd Airborne Division in the late 1990s, NCOs were the bedrock of unit training. Soldiers trained to master their craft in any environment and become experts in defending tactical assembly areas.

The corporals and sergeants across the units were

some of the most knowledgeable and influential leaders. They were eager to prove themselves to everyone, and there were no challenges they couldn't overcome.

Junior NCOs were regularly in charge of weapons ranges, convoy operations, and foot marches. And they served as jumpmasters on airborne operations.

One of the most experienced jumpmasters in my first company assignment was a corporal. He was two points shy of maxing out on promotion, but due to end-strength, he couldn't make the cutoff for promotion to sergeant.

This corporal was Training Room NCO and the company's Master Jumpmaster. During this time, he won multiple Soldier and NCO of the Month boards. He resembled a walking regulation, and there were few unit training and leadership questions he couldn't answer.

As a corporal, he amassed more tactical jumps than anyone else in the unit. It was amusing to see senior leaders envy a corporal who oversaw a moderate-risk night mass-tactical airborne operation with a zero-dark-thirty drop time.

I was a private first class when I met this incredible corporal, and I immediately admired his dedication and professionalism. I noticed leaders and Soldiers alike respected this junior NCO for his competence and technical mastery of his craft. The young man seemed to embrace additional responsibility with tremendous energy, because he knew everyone depended on his expertise.

His competence — the proficiency of a single junior

NCO — kept our unit ready to conduct airborne operations successfully. Every interaction with him influenced my perception of NCOs and defined who I wanted to become as a future leader. Competence quickly became my watchword.

Competence is My Watchword

Throughout the Army's history, NCOs have been the organization's backbone. Many who hear that for the first time wonder what it means. A great place to start for understanding is the *NCO Creed*, with its ideas of conduct, service, and humility.

Those elements are vital, but one statement near the creed's middle establishes the core of the Army's backbone: "Competence is my watchword" (NCO Creed — Army Values, n.d.). NCOs grounded in competence — regardless of rank — are technically and tactically proficient, self-aware of their duties and responsibilities, and readiness-focused as leaders. Competence is more than a watchword. It is the key to being ready.

Tactically and Technically Proficient

There are many things to consider when discussing competence, but tactical and technical proficiency quickly come to mind. In the past, fixed supply chains allowed for consistency in equipment issue and training exposure.

By contrast, today's Army equipment changes often, and the organization constantly reconsiders whether



The U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence conducts a Noncommissioned Officer Induction Ceremony hosted by 110th Aviation Brigade at Fort Novosel, Ala., Oct. 10, 2024. (U.S. Army photo by Kelly Morris)

NCO training and education is sufficient. Training aside, however, the responsibility to build and maintain technical proficiency is a matter of personal accountability.

Technical proficiency with the tools of your chosen trade is a matter of sets and reps, not of rank. The more NCOs master their craft or specialty, the better prepared they are to lead, mentor, and train others in that skill set.

Additionally, a technically proficient NCO will always be ready — and that includes dealing with new equipment! After all, such readiness is the hallmark of a professional.

Still, technical proficiency in the military requires context: an understanding of how the tools and skills are employed. Tactical proficiency is the context for employing technically proficient skills on the battlefield or to support a commander's mission. Soldiers and units usually build tactical proficiency in two ways.

First, Soldiers must understand the guiding doctrine surrounding their branch and the greater Army's doctrine. The expectation to read the relevant doctrine surrounding one's chosen profession is reasonable.

After all, doctrine provides leaders and Soldiers with a common language and understanding of operations. This shared knowledge supplements the trust between leaders and Soldiers, a bedrock of exercising disciplined initiative.

Second, tactical proficiency arises from training. The Army doesn't have cookie-cutter training budgets, and the perceived training quality differs between units. However, the ability to embrace and communicate training value to be ready for an unknown future is highly valuable and within everyone's grasp. Training makes us more tactically competent and prepared for eventual combat.

Technically and tactically competent NCOs are ready to use and employ their weapon or system to support any mission. Combat will eventually serve as an assessment for NCOs and their Soldiers — it doesn't allow for pause or cramming.

Therefore, NCOs must establish competencies before combat. Those who emphasize technical and tactical competence for themselves and their Soldiers become their commanders' combat enablers.

Self-Aware: Duties and Responsibilities

NCOs are professionals. The promotion to *hard stripes* implies Soldiers made a deliberate decision to embrace their job as a profession. Regardless of rank, competent NCOs understand their assigned duties and responsibilities and do not necessarily require a reminder or explanation of their position on the team.

After all, the *NCO Creed* states that an NCO's officers will "have maximum time to accomplish their duties," and "they will not have to accomplish mine" (*NCO Creed — Army Values*, n.d.).

NCOs competent in their duties and responsibilities

know and embrace their role as primary trainers and first-line leaders in their units of assignment. Organizationally competent NCOs understand mission command and the value of communication. They develop meaningful professional relationships across their unit.

In short, organizationally competent NCOs understand their purpose and require minimal guidance, operating regularly from commanders' intent. Again, rank and position are immaterial. Organizationally competent NCOs enhance readiness at

all levels. Combat does not care if you know your role and duties, but combat will test that understanding.

Readiness-Focused Leadership

NCOs who know their craft and role in their unit should always consider readiness. Readiness does not happen overnight, and — to continue to draw inspiration from the Sergeant Major of the Army's messaging — combat does not care if you or your Soldiers are ready (Weimer, 2024).

Leaders and professionals care about readiness. The tactically and technically competent NCOs who possess a firm sense of organizational structure and purpose meaningfully train the Soldiers they directly serve and further enhance greater unit training.

A sense of readiness-focused leadership means NCOs understand the realities of war, prepare for future combat, and develop Soldiers into competent warriors and leaders.

Readiness-focused NCOs bear the ultimate mark of professionalism, realizing they are part of something greater, "a member of a time honored corps" (*NCO Creed — Army Values*, n.d.). These NCOs know combat doesn't care if you are ready when you show up, and they



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Command Sgt. Maj. Kirk R. Coley, Aviation branch command sergeant major, speaks to AIT Soldiers before they go home for the holidays, thanking them for their service and reminding them to be safe at Fort Novosel, Ala., Dec. 14, 2023.

assess both individual and unit readiness well before arrival to a combat theater.

Conclusion

Readiness is a big topic in the Army today, and it will be in the future. Competence, the hallowed watchword of the NCO, is the key to readiness. Those who hold the key hold the Army's future success in their hands. Competence comes from education and through meaningful training. Competence doesn't sprout from simply participating — it is the payoff of challenging and realistic training.

Cultivating competence and readiness results in the ability to answer the nation's call. On Sept. 11, 2001, history handed the military notification of a competence test. Several units activated in response to the attack and the subsequent hunt for Osama bin Laden. Until then, those units were decisively training for competence in large-scale combat. As a result, these units were highly disciplined and capable of responding when combat put

them to the test.

When you consider the meaning of the phrase, "Competence is my watchword," ensure you give it full thought. Soldiers and NCOs must never forget they build competence through professional study and hard training. Learn your organization's role and purpose and professionally support your commanders, fellow leaders, and assigned Soldiers.

Your pursuit of competence will create a sense of readiness-oriented leadership that meaningfully produces training events to enhance both your unit's and the Army's survivability and lethality. After all, every Soldier's mission is to be accessible and ready at a moment's notice, to alert and rapidly assemble in preparation to jump into enemy territory.

Pursue competence in all you do as an NCO and Soldier. That pursuit will ensure you remain true to a profession that is the envy of our adversaries and the backbone of the U.S. Army. ■

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