



NCOs are the backbone of the Army, shaping its culture through leadership, training, and discipline. Developing resilient and adaptable NCOs is essential to overcoming complex challenges and preparing them to lead effectively in today's and the future's Army. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Emely Eckels)

Future Army Challenges and NCO Development

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"No one is more professional than I. I am a Noncommissioned Officer, a leader of Soldiers. As a Noncommissioned Officer, I realize that I am a member of a time honored corps, which is known as 'The Backbone of the Army.'"

(NCO Creed, Department of the Army, n.d.)

These first three sentences from the NCO Creed define what NCOs are to the U.S. Army. They are the backbone. The chief support and foundation of the entire enterprise. What everything and everyone depends on to function.

NCOs are the firm, strong characters within our

formations whom all should want to emulate, and they are the drivers of our organizations' climates. They are responsible for their own leader development, which keeps the corps strong and relevant for the future Army. Simply put, NCOs are the example.

Our NCOs are the primary Soldier trainers. They

mentor both subordinates and superiors. They enforce standards and discipline. They provide solutions to conflict. And they cultivate the culture of every single organization in the Army.

These roles and responsibilities are critical to the Army's daily conduct. There could be negative and long-lasting consequences if current and future NCOs lack precise personal and professional development, with the adverse effects creating deep-rooted weaknesses throughout the enterprise.

Let's explore potential adjustments to consider when developing the NCO corps. These approaches will prepare them to overcome the complex challenges they will likely encounter as leaders in today's — and, more importantly, the future's — Army.

The Need for Resilient and Adaptive NCOs

I've served as a command sergeant major in Battalion, Brigade, and both 1-star and 2-star nominative positions. I've frequently discussed the focus of our NCO Development Programs with senior enlisted leaders within my commands. These conversations too often lead to two questions:

- What purpose should the NCO Professional Development System (NCOPDS) serve?
- How can we better prepare our command's NCOs for the challenges awaiting them?

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

As you read this article, ask these questions:

1. Are any of these future NCO challenges in your formation?
2. How are you adjusting your approach to NCO development for future complex situations?
3. How do you better mentor your subordinates and peers so they accept that being an NCO isn't a job but a lifestyle?
4. Where are you and your subordinates vulnerable?
5. What must you understand about future NCO challenges to be a more impactful leader and mentor?
6. How do you incorporate the NCO Creed and Army Values into development programs?

A recurring topic is their need to be more resilient during crises and more adaptive to change. Tomorrow's NCOs must be able to adapt to constantly changing working environments, social cultures that shape tomorrow's youth, and a futuristic and violent battlefield that will test the resilience of the most hardened leaders.

Those capable of solving the most complex



Staff Sgt. Tanner Balsinger, assigned to 2nd Cavalry Regiment, instructs a group of Soldiers during a route reconnaissance training lane at Plossberg, Bavaria, Germany, Feb. 25, 2025. NCOs are the primary Soldier trainers who mentor both subordinates and superiors, enforce standards, provide solutions to conflict, and cultivate the culture of every organization in the Army. (U.S. Army Photo by Pfc. Brent Lee)

problems in the most chaotic situations will succeed in tomorrow's wars. To develop that within our NCO corps, we must focus on how they manage and perform under stress, especially when catastrophic failure seems imminent or unavoidable.

NCOs who are emotionally intelligent and possess psychological endurance must lead our future formations in combat. At the home front, those with these skills will better cultivate a culture of resilience across all ranks.

The NCO corps must be able to use the power of the mind and psychological strength to power themselves through the most chaotic and violent situations. They must regularly practice this during tough, realistic, and stressful training to strengthen the fighting will of future NCOs.

How do we train and prepare NCOs to be more resilient and adaptive, especially in a resource-limited enterprise for which subject-matter experts are difficult to find? One option is being practiced in our current Command Assessment Program (CAP), which determines if leaders are ready to assume positions as brigade commanders, battalion commanders, or brigade command sergeants major.

During CAP, operational psychologists assess candidates through a structured battery of psychometric assessments that measure, in part, problem-solving abilities and intellect as well as personality characteristics (including resilience and conscientiousness). Personnel selection programs across the Department of Defense and intelligence community use these assessments.

Operational psychologists identify candidates' strengths and — more importantly — their vulnerabilities through behaviorally based questions. Is it time to develop these assessments for all our NCOs? Imagine the capabilities within the NCO corps if we could identify where they are most vulnerable through operational psychologists' assessments.

Developing an assessment that senior enlisted leaders across the Army could use at their home station and with regularity could lead to NCO development programs focused on building a more resilient and adaptive NCO corps.

It's Not Just a Job

As noted, NCOs are the example. And we must deliberately develop them to understand how their words, actions, and behaviors impact the climate and culture of their organizations and installations.

For example, imagine if company or battery NCOs fail to enforce standards and discipline — or continually fail to correct unacceptable Soldier behavior and performance in their unit. How do you imagine that unit will perform in combat?



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We've all witnessed NCOs who walk past discrepancies without attempting to correct them. Doing so sets a new standard.

How often have you visited your installation's PX food court during lunch? I challenge you to do so. Witness how frequently simple on-the-spot corrections are ignored or brushed off by NCOs.

If there is a problem with enforcing standards and discipline across the Army, shouldn't we take a closer look at how we are developing our NCO corps to professionally and fearlessly attack this failure? Shouldn't we prioritize our NCOs' roles and responsibilities to the Army?

We must reinforce to the NCO corps that being an NCO isn't a job. It's a lifestyle. With that lifestyle comes an unwavering

commitment to the Army Values and the NCO Creed.

Unfortunately, we sometimes rely solely on NCO Academies to develop and build upon this commitment and lifestyle in their classrooms. Shouldn't this instead be the foundation of the NCO professional development programs across the Army?

Units that do this regularly are primed and ready to successfully perform their combat mission in the most chaotic and complex battlefields. Those who don't wonder why their Soldiers behave unacceptably, why their unit is always on the installation blotter report, why their equipment fleet in the motor pool is never mission-capable, and why their families always complain that the Army doesn't do enough to support them.

NCOs must also understand that their Soldiers hear every word they say and see every action they perform. If their conduct is questionable, Soldiers see it and mirror



The Army must explore effective training methods despite limited resources. The Command Assessment Program (CAP) offers one solution by using operational psychologists to evaluate candidates' problem-solving skills, intellect, and resilience. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. 1st Class James Braswell)

it. Why not? No one is going to correct them.

Too often, NCOs are the source of unacceptable behavior and performance in units. We must reenergize the NCO corps to self-correct and to ensure they aren't the root cause of the problem.

What are we doing to reinforce to the NCOs that their responsibilities go beyond 0900 to 1700 Monday through Friday, and it's their responsibility to correct deficiencies at all times and places? Remember: An NCO isn't a job or rank. It's a lifestyle and a commitment.

Can We Talk?

In my leadership development sessions with sergeants, corporals, and specialists attending Basic Leadership Training, I ask if they've ever had a sensitive conversation with one of their Soldiers or teammates. Few ever raise their hand.

Young leaders grow up in a society where the favored method of communication is through a device, not in person. So, how can they effectively talk to Soldiers about topics such as relationship problems, financial mismanagement, Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) incidents, substance abuse, or domestic violence? Many, if not most, of our younger NCOs can't.

Some older NCOs with many years in service and

time in grade are also incapable of these conversations. How many times have you needed to speak with a peer, subordinate, or family member about a sensitive topic? If you lack this experience, you will struggle to prepare others for the challenge.

I've had many such conversations over my 31 years of service, including informing a Soldier on my watch of a relative's death (while in the middle of the desert during Operation Iraqi Freedom) and, in another instance, telling a relative of a Soldier's death.

Even with all of my years of service, these conversations were challenging. Now imagine if someone with much less experience had to make these notifications — or needed to discuss a sensitive topic about which they had zero experience.

What if the conversation is about a SHARP, Equal Opportunity (EO), or domestic violence issue? That's a scenario we must avoid by preparing junior leaders capable of professionally engaging their subject and showing genuine care through conversation. Only those with experience in these situations can properly do this.

Training and equipping future leaders to sprint into the breach and fearlessly engage the enemy is a leadership responsibility. But we are discovering that, in many cases, our adversaries aren't on the battlefield. They form in our formations and communities.

Future NCOs will be challenged by complex problems driven by an ever-changing society, which results in undesirable changes to the Army's culture. If allowed to progress and spread, these challenges will impact unit readiness. The issues could make organizations combat ineffective.

To keep these concerns from spreading onto the battlefield, we must foster an NCO corps capable of addressing them through genuine conversation and engaged leadership before they become problems.

To bring positive and effective change to the root cause of these challenges, NCOs must be able to clearly and effectively communicate consistently over time. They must speak to solve problems, give daily guidance and direction, make on-the-spot corrections, and train or operate in chaotic situations.

Future NCOs won't have time to explain continually why something must be done. There will always be times when Soldiers must respond immediately to their leaders' guidance and direction. Even in those instances, NCOs should follow up after these events and discuss the "why."

Soldiers usually only need to understand their roles and responsibilities to perform them as

desired. Good NCOs share this through practiced, clear, and effective communication.

Conclusion

The NCO corps is the nucleus keeping the Army rolling. No other group on Earth is as impactful or powerful. Small family businesses and global, multibillion-dollar corporations have examined how the Army develops and trains its enlisted leaders. Foreign armies worldwide study our NCO corps, hoping to emulate their professionalism and competence within their formations.

NCOs are the Army's lifeblood, and we must invest heavily in their development to overcome future challenges. They will be engaged in much more complex situations in the years to come: from training and preparation to conducting Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO), from societal changes adversely affecting the Army's culture to the decline in the art of face-to-face communication. The time to prepare is now.

As we move forward and transition in contact to provide weapon platforms and technologies capable of defeating even our best-trained and best-equipped adversary, we must also prepare our core strength to overcome them. That core strength is the NCO corps. ■



Being an NCO is not just a job; it is a lifestyle that comes with an unwavering commitment to the Army Values and the NCO Creed. Through on-the-spot corrections, NCOs enforce standards, build accountability, and ensure their Soldiers are primed and ready to successfully perform their combat mission in the most chaotic and complex battlefields. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Josue Patricio)

References

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