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The “Be, Know, Do” Approach in the Ukrainian Military

By Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Sergio Porras

Sergeants Major Course

In response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its support of separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian government initiated urgent reforms to modernize its military. A key aspect of this transformation was developing a capable and professional NCO corps.

Ukraine inherited a Soviet-style military structure characterized by a rigid, officer-centric command system. The lack of NCO empowerment and professional development pathways hindered the decentralized execution and adaptability necessary for modern warfare and NATO interoperability.

Recognizing these challenges, U.S. and NATO allies established the Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine (JMTG-U) in 2015. The Ukraine

State Partnership Program sponsor was the California National Guard, which co-lead the annual Rapid Trident Exercise with established subject matter experts.

As the first U.S. Army command sergeant major (CSM) assigned to this mission, I played a foundational role in shaping the vision, culture, and training framework required to build the Ukrainian NCO corps. This initiative was not just about tactical training; it was a leadership challenge rooted in cultural transformation and institutional development.

To guide this effort, I used the “Be, Know, Do” leadership framework (Headquarters, 1999), which emphasizes values-based leadership (Be), professional competence (Know), and action-oriented execution (Do).

This model served as both my personal leadership compass and as a foundational teaching tool for Ukrainian NCOs. It provided structure to a mission that demanded technical military instruction, mentorship, cultural sensitivity, and moral courage.

The “Be, Know, Do” Leadership Framework

The “Be, Know, Do” leadership model is a cornerstone of U.S. Army leadership doctrine and has proven adaptable in diverse environments, including multinational operations.

With roots in decades of military experience, this model offers a straightforward yet profound approach to leader development, focusing on character, competence, and action.

It was initially codified in U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 22-100, Military Leadership, and later refined in FM 6-22, Developing Leaders, and Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, Army Leadership and the Profession.

The “Be, Know, Do” model continues to serve as a guiding framework for military leaders at all levels (HEADQUARTERS, 2015).

The Army developed the “Be, Know, Do” framework to cultivate a leadership culture that integrates personal integrity, professional expertise, and effective execution.

Unlike leadership models that emphasize authority or hierarchy, this framework stresses leaders’ individual responsibility to embody values, acquire knowledge, and act decisively. Its flexible structure can be adapted across cultural contexts, making it especially relevant in my role as the first CSM for the JMTG-U.

As Ukraine’s military shifted from Soviet-style, officer-centric to mission-command capable, the “Be, Know, Do” model bridged theory and practice. This framework helped U.S. and NATO mentors connect leadership principles to practical application in a culturally respectful way.

The “Be” component highlights internal qualities, such as integrity, empathy, discipline, humility, and courage, which build trust essential for effective leadership.

In Ukraine, where military culture often favored compliance over initiative, modeling “Be” leadership was crucial. By demonstrating moral character and ethical decision-making, I influenced our Ukrainian counterparts, showing that leadership is about setting an example.

The “Know” aspect focuses on the knowledge and skills needed for effective leadership, including tactical proficiency and cultural understanding. Building a solid knowledge base for the Ukrainian NCO corps was vital for national security. My role as CSM and senior enlisted advisor involved developing a curriculum that addressed warfighting skills and ethical decision-making, tailoring lessons to Ukraine’s specific needs.

The “Do” component translates character and knowledge into action. Leaders must make timely decisions and empower subordinates. At JMTG-U, we modeled this by instilling a culture where NCOs took initiative and ownership without waiting for officer approval. We established training pipelines and promotion pathways to foster confident leadership among NCOs.



The “Be, Know, Do” leadership framework served as both my personal leadership compass and as a foundational teaching tool for Ukrainian NCOs. It provided structure to a mission that demanded technical military instruction, mentorship, cultural sensitivity, and moral courage. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Justin Navin)

The “Be, Know, Do” model proved invaluable in our multinational efforts, focusing on tactical training while fostering trust and initiative among NCOs. This approach supported individual growth and drove systemic reforms in Ukraine’s NCO professional military education (PME), addressing urgent leadership needs.

Establishing the JMTG-U Mission and Vision

JMTG-U was formed in response to Ukraine’s urgent need for military reform following the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and ongoing conflict in eastern

Ukraine. As the first CSM, I focused on training and leader development, shaping a mission grounded in partnership and sustainable transformation.

At that time, the Ukrainian military was contending with an active conflict while trying to reform a rigid Soviet-era structure that lacked agile leadership at lower levels.

U.S. and NATO partners aimed to develop a professional NCO corps to strengthen Ukraine's military capabilities. The Department of Defense emphasized this in its strategic guidance, highlighting the importance of allied NCO corps for long-term security cooperation.

Our vision at JMTG-U extended beyond tactical training; we aspired to empower the Ukrainian Armed Forces to own their leader development and training structures, creating a self-sustaining NCO corps resilient enough to operate independent of foreign assistance.

This vision involved working collaboratively with Ukrainian leaders, emphasizing mutual respect and cultural understanding rather than a prescriptive approach.



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One significant challenge was aligning multiple partner nations' diverse contributions, each with their own military culture and training methods.

I collaborated with Canadian, U.K., Lithuanian, Polish, and other NATO ally counterparts to establish a unified training philosophy based on shared values.

Regular meetings and inclusive planning sessions helped us define success: Ukrainian NCOs who were technically competent, empowered, and capable of decentralized decision-making. The "Be, Know, Do" model facilitated this process by providing a common leadership and mentorship framework.

Ultimately, trust was the cornerstone of our efforts. Building strong relationships with Ukrainian senior

officers and enlisted personnel was essential, ensuring they viewed us as allies and professionals rather than outsiders.

I spent time with Ukrainian Soldiers in the field, classrooms, and leadership forums — listening, learning, and providing support. My approach, grounded in humility and mutual respect, helped foster open discussions about the challenges within the Ukrainian military and the potential for empowering NCOs.

Initially, many officers were skeptical. They were used to a culture of centralized authority. However, through dialogue and modeling shared leadership, I gradually earned their trust.

Senior Ukrainian officers began advocating for reform, recognizing the tactical advantage of having skilled, empowered NCOs, reinforced by their experiences in the Donbas conflict.

With trust established, we implemented integrated training cycles, mentorship, and institutional development. Collaboration with military training

institutions, such as the Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi Academy and the Desna Training Center, allowed them to incorporate NCO professional development into the curricula.

These initiatives aligned with Ukraine's strategic goals of NATO interoperability and improved operational readiness. By embedding leadership development into military reform, a foundation was laid for long-term resilience.

Applying "Be" – Modeling Leadership and Values

The "Be" pillar of the "Be, Know, Do" leadership framework emphasizes leadership's moral foundation. I strove to embody the values we aimed to instill in our partners.

Leading by example was crucial, as Ukrainian troops watch us closely. Every interaction was an opportunity to model core values of loyalty, respect, and integrity.

I recognized early we had to demonstrate the "Be" component in action. I prioritized being present in the field and during formations to reinforce that leaders need to show up. This visibility changed perception of the NCO role, especially among junior Soldiers who did not see senior enlisted leader involvement.

Understanding cultural differences took sensitivity.

In a post-Soviet environment, initiative was not often rewarded, making it essential to balance respect for traditions with inspiring change.

Trust was a cornerstone of our efforts.

It had to be earned through consistent actions and transparency. When facing skepticism from Ukrainian officers, I practiced quiet leadership, asking questions

and sharing my own experiences with the hope of building connections and fostering understanding.

I also ensured that senior enlisted Ukrainian NCOs had a voice in their professional development by including them in discussions on curriculum and after-action reviews. This approach created a sense of shared commitment to the reforms we aimed to implement.

In the “Be” domain, presence is defined not just by physical appearance but by discipline, posture, and emotional composure. In a combat-oriented force, these traits signal leadership competence and resilience.

I also introduced the concept of “command presence” to Ukrainian NCO candidates, focusing on how body language, tone of voice, and confidence can inspire morale. Through role-playing and feedback, we developed these often-overlooked soft skills in a traditionally rigid military environment.

Despite this progress, challenges remained. The divide between officers and enlisted personnel was significant, with junior officers hesitant to share authority and some older NCOs resistant to change. Language and translation issues further complicated our discussions around concepts like “initiative” and “leadership.”

However, the power of example proved to be transformative. As Ukrainian officers witnessed empowered NCOs taking initiative in the field, their perspectives shifted. “Be” evolved from a concept to a driving force on the battlefield.

Applying “Know” – Building Knowledge and Professional Expertise

The second pillar of the “Be, Know, Do” leadership model — “Know” — focuses on the intellectual foundation of leadership, including self-awareness, professional knowledge, and understanding tactics.

At JMTG-U, this principle was critical in helping Ukrainian NCOs develop the skills they needed to lead effectively.

Initially, they were underused, often limited to administrative duties and lacking access to PME. Our goal was to bridge this gap by providing the necessary technical and tactical knowledge for modern military operations.



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We supported the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense through the NCO’s Affairs Directorate of General Staff Ukrainian Armed Forces in creating a tiered NCO Professional Development System (PDS), partly modeled on the U.S. Army’s NCO Education System under the Ukraine Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP) (Stolberg, 2022). This initiative established structured learning outcomes and course levels to ensure NCOs progressed through PME at crucial career milestones.

The system included:

- Basic leadership courses for junior NCOs
- Intermediate courses focused on platoon leadership and training management
- Senior NCO courses emphasizing joint operations and NATO interoperability

Each course level provided doctrine-based instruction, leader development, ethical decision-making, and problem-solving tailored to the Ukrainian operational environment.

Mission command was a key focus, empowering subordinates to make decisions within the commander’s intent — an approach new to the traditionally top-down Ukrainian military. We taught NCOs to assess situations, make timely decisions, and take initiative under pressure.

We also worked with Ukrainian officers to illustrate how trained NCOs could enhance their command authority, promoting a shift in mindset across the force.

Developing technical and operational competencies was another crucial element.

NCOs learned essential military skills such as weapons employment, logistics, and battle tracking through immersive training and live-fire scenarios. This “train-the-trainer” model accelerated the Ukrainian military’s knowledge transfer and leader development.

We supported the establishment of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) institutions to formalize best practices and institutionalize technical military knowledge.

In addition to technical skills, we emphasized the human aspects of leadership, including team dynamics, motivation, and crisis leadership. Workshops on emotional intelligence and conflict resolution helped NCOs become more effective leaders, shifting the culture from command-and-control to coaching.



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For knowledge to be sustainable, it must be formalized. We collaborated with the Ukrainian general staff and the Ministry of Defense to define NCO roles in standard operating procedures (SOPs) and doctrine publications, reinforcing their institutional legitimacy.

Lastly, we contributed to the development of a Ukrainian NCO Handbook, outlining leadership competencies and career progression. This handbook, available in both Ukrainian and English, became a symbol of transformation and a practical resource for soldiers and leaders.

Applying “Do” – Turning Leadership into Action

The third pillar of the “Be, Know, Do” leadership framework — “Do” — focuses on action. It encompasses the practical application of leadership: executing

missions, leading people, improving systems, and building trust through consistent performance.

My role’s “Do” aspect was where strategy and intention met reality. It required translating values and knowledge into practical, visible leadership practices that inspired Ukrainian NCOs and built enduring institutional momentum.

Leadership in action involves being visible and actively engaged. Whether conducting early morning physical training, evaluating tactical exercises, or facilitating engagements with Ukrainian and NATO partners, I ensured my actions were aligned with mission objectives.

Ukrainian Soldiers watched us closely, reinforcing the idea that NCOs are active leaders responsible for their units’ readiness and welfare.

I frequently accompanied the Ukrainian Senior Enlisted Advisor or his deputy chief of NCO development during training events, providing real-time coaching and feedback.

For instance, during a field training exercise at the International Peacekeeping and Security Center (IPSC) in Yavoriv, Ukraine, I supported a newly promoted platoon sergeant who was unsure of his role. By encouraging him to take the initiative, he built both competence and confidence, leading to broader cultural shifts within the units.

We implemented a “train-the-trainer” model, mentoring promising Ukrainian NCOs to serve as instructors in their formations. This peer-led approach fostered a sense of ownership over the transformation process.

These NCO instructors received training in tactics, instructional methodology, and leadership coaching, ultimately becoming central to newly established NCO academies across Ukraine’s military.

The impact of this initiative was significant. Ukrainian NCOs now lead exercises, facilitate discussions, and mentor younger Soldiers, shifting perceptions of their roles from enforcers of orders to influential leaders.

Implementing NCO Professional Development

Furthermore, we worked to institutionalize practices that supported NCO development, integrating responsibilities into training schedules and planning cycles.

Implementing leader professional development (LPD) sessions allowed for professional dialogue and continuous improvement, while after-action reviews led by NCOs reinforced their operational relevance.

Transformational change requires small victories. At JMTG-U, we celebrated milestones like the first NCO-led formation or an NCO briefing a battalion commander.

These successes, though symbolic, accumulated over time. They bolstered institutional confidence in the NCO system, leading to increased deference from officers, mentorship-seeking from Soldiers, and advocacy for greater NCO authority within formations.

Executing change also meant navigating resistance. Some Ukrainian officers believed NCO empowerment threatened their authority. Others doubted that enlisted personnel could manage complex responsibilities or make sound decisions in combat. Overcoming this skepticism required persistence, diplomacy, and alignment with shared goals.

I spent considerable time engaging with Ukrainian commanders to frame NCO development as a force multiplier aligned with their national objectives, rather than a Western import. I emphasized how empowered NCOs could improve unit cohesion, speed decision-making, and enhance battlefield adaptability. As Ukrainian units began to see these benefits, their resistance softened.

My goal was to inspire a shared vision for Ukrainian NCOs as professional warfighters and trusted leaders. This vision took root as they wrote their leadership philosophies, organized mentorship networks, and advocated for reform, seeing themselves as true leaders rather than mere functionaries.

Changing entrenched cultural perceptions was a significant challenge. For years, NCOs were viewed primarily as disciplinarians within a rigid command structure. Many had never experienced autonomy or been encouraged to contribute in operational settings, making it uncomfortable for them to speak up in planning meetings.

To shift these perceptions, we aimed for small, consistent wins. By publicly recognizing capable NCOs and fostering trust between enlisted leaders and officers, we gradually demonstrated the value of NCO leadership.

Overcoming Cultural and Institutional Challenges

Language also posed a barrier, as many NCOs were not familiar with English. This required interpreters during training, and relying on them occasionally led to distorted concepts. We addressed this by

partnering with bilingual instructors to reframe U.S. doctrine and developing bilingual materials.

Like many large institutions, the Ukrainian Armed Forces had entrenched bureaucratic systems that were slow to change (Mackinnon, 2021). Even with senior leadership support, promotions remained based on time-in-service, and high-performing NCOs had minimal incentives for long-term careers.

We addressed these challenges by collaborating directly with the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense and the general staff to update policies, revise personnel regulations, and establish formal career development frameworks.

Although progress was often uneven and delayed because of internal debates, resource issues, or political shifts, our persistence eventually paid off. Over time, we observed that policy aligned with practice, which included:

- Establishing NCO professional development courses
- Integrating NCOs into joint staff planning processes
- Clarifying NCO roles in doctrine and SOPs



Initially, NCOs were underused, often limited to administrative duties and lacking access to PME. Our goal was to bridge this gap by providing the necessary technical and tactical knowledge for modern military operations. We also worked with Ukrainian officers to illustrate how trained NCOs could enhance their command authority. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. John Yountz)

Maintaining Continuity and Institutional Memory

Another ongoing challenge was maintaining continuity amid rotating U.S. and NATO units supporting the JMTG-U. New leaders and instructors arrived every six to nine months, which required handovers and acclimatization to the Ukrainian operational environment. Without effective knowledge management, progress risked stalling or regressing.

Lessons Learned from Transformation in a Conflict Zone

One of the defining challenges of the Ukrainian NCO transformation effort was its proximity to actual conflict. Unlike peacetime force development initiatives, this effort took place during an ongoing hybrid war with Russia.

Ukrainian Soldiers trained during the week and deployed to the front lines on weekends, and some NCOs were killed in action shortly after graduating from training



Some Ukrainian officers believed NCO empowerment threatened their authority. Others doubted that enlisted personnel could manage complex responsibilities or make sound decisions in combat. Overcoming this skepticism required persistence, diplomacy, and alignment with shared goals. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Preston Hammon)

To address this, we developed institutional continuity tools, including:

- Detailed leader handbooks
- Standardized training programs
- Shared databases of best practices and key leader engagements
- “Left seat/right seat” transition briefings

We also embedded institutional memory by partnering with permanent Ukrainian training personnel and establishing training centers. These organizations became continuity anchors, even as foreign military advisors rotated.

courses. This tragic reality infused our work with urgency and gravity.

Reflecting on the experience, several lessons emerged that apply to similar international military development missions:

1. Leader transformation begins with belief. NCOs must first believe they are leaders before others will, too. This self-concept is developed through encouragement, mentoring, and opportunities to lead.
2. Cultural change is incremental but powerful. Small shifts in behavior — such as involving NCOs in planning or allowing them to brief a commander — can trigger broader cultural transformation over time.

3. Partnership is more effective than prescription. Ukrainian leaders were more receptive to ideas framed as collaborative adaptations rather than as foreign mandates. Mutual respect laid the foundation for enduring progress.

4. Continuity and institutional memory are essential. Transition plans, standardized materials, and embedded local leadership are critical to sustaining momentum across rotational deployments.

5. Success is measured in outcomes, not just adoption. While not all U.S. leadership practices translated directly into Ukrainian military culture, the true measure of success was whether Ukrainian NCOs became more effective, confident, and empowered in their roles.

Conclusion

The transformation of Ukraine's NCO corps shows that effective leadership goes beyond tactics. It is a combination of cultivating character, knowledge, and decisive action. By applying the "Be, Know, Do" framework, we fostered trust, built professional competence, and empowered NCOs to take initiative in a historically rigid system.

Progress was neither quick nor easy, but through patience, collaboration, and persistence, Ukrainian NCOs began to see themselves as leaders, not just followers, capable of shaping their units and contributing meaningfully to national defense.

This experience underscores that sustainable change comes from mentoring, cultural respect, and small, consistent victories that reinforce both individual and institutional growth. ■

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