



Breaking resistance begins with building trust and credibility with Soldiers. NCOs don't overcome resistance with rank alone. They do it through strategy, presence, and grit. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Oscar Toscano)

Leading from the Front: Breaking Through Resistance in Today's Army

By Command Sgt. Maj. Dennis A. Doyle

Combined Arms Center-Training (CAC-T)

When I raised my right hand in the late '90s, I walked into an Army caught between two worlds. We trained relentlessly for a large-scale war with a peer adversary while our real-world missions were peacekeeping operations. Before 9/11, the era was defined by the "peace dividend."

The Army was shrinking, and our mantra became "do more with less." Instead of firing 120mm main gun rounds from an M1 tank, we were forced to shoot .50 caliber rounds from an in-bore device, which is not exactly exhilarating, but it was the nature of the beast.

This environment bred a culture of mastering what we already knew. With tight budgets, we polished the old

ways until they gleamed, because experimenting with the new felt like a luxury we couldn't afford. This wasn't about being stubborn; it was about survival. We became a force built on reacting to change instead of driving it.

The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan broke that reactive pattern, not through foresight, but through brutal necessity. The counterinsurgency fight forced us to become flexible, to innovate under fire, and to adapt faster than our enemies. It also conditioned us to depend on crisis as our catalyst for change.

Today, the crutch of crisis-driven adaptation has been kicked out from under us. The war in Ukraine, the fight with Iran, other conflicts in the Middle East, and

the relentless pressure from our pacing threats make one thing brutally clear: Urgency is no longer optional. Hesitation now means failure.

Why NCOs Must Become the Modernization Breakthrough Force

Breaking Down Walls, Not Tiptoeing Around Them

The Army doesn't need leaders who tap lightly on obstacles; it needs leaders who are ready to explode through walls like the "Kool-Aid Man" when those walls stand between the formation and progress.

As we take on friction, however, we must remain professional, approaching resistance with respect and tact, focusing on solutions rather than conflict. Too many good ideas die because leaders fear hitting resistance with the force required to break through it.

Modernization isn't optional, it's a necessity.

Every new system, concept, or initiative collides with the same predictable barricades: tradition, comfort, and the deep-rooted mindset of "we've always done it this way."

I've watched firsthand how quickly organizations can stall when nobody is willing to challenge these walls.

This is where I believe the NCO Corps earns its legacy. *Positioned at the intersection of vision, intent, and execution, NCOs either facilitate change becoming reality or they contribute to another great idea left to die in a binder.*

Being a change agent is not passive; it is active, deliberate, and sometimes confrontational. It takes confidence to identify outdated practices, courage to challenge them, and momentum to break through resistance when necessary.

To outpace adversaries, the U.S. Army needs not only officers, but also NCOs to lead that charge — boldly. We must break down the walls that keep our formations from moving forward. To break through resistance, however, you must first understand it.

The Nature of Resistance

Resistance is not a sign of weakness in the force; it's a predictable human response. Good NCOs anticipate it, recognize its source, and face weaknesses head-on.

Where Resistance Comes From

- Tradition and Inertia: Routines become comfort; comfort becomes a barrier.
- Fear of the Unknown: New processes create uncertainty.
- Threats to Status or Comfort: Change disrupts established roles.
- Lack of Understanding: When the "why" is missing, resistance fills the gap.
- Past Failures: Soldiers remember wasted time and false starts.
- Bureaucratic Drag: Even great ideas get choked by outdated regulations.

Turning Bureaucracy into Opportunity

I served as the command sergeant major of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment on the forward edge of Freedom (this refers to the unit's historical and ongoing role as the vanguard of American and Allied defense, operating on the front lines of conflict).



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We quickly realized how essential drones were, especially while training Ukrainian forces. However, outdated airworthiness requirements and limitations on flying drones slowed our progress to a crawl.

Every modification we made required layers of review, and every flight demanded a cumbersome Restricted Operating Zone (ROZ). It was frustrating to see bureaucracy dictate our operational pace, especially when Army senior leaders were urging us to move faster.

We couldn't allow unnecessary red tape to prevent us from accomplishing the mission. Together, we dissected the regulations/policies, identified the real decision-makers, and challenged outdated assumptions head-on.

With senior leader support, we eventually secured an Exception to Policy (ETP) that allowed commanders to accept prudent risk and make incremental drone modifications without having to navigate layers of bureaucracy. This breakthrough paved the way for rapid drone innovation, not just across the European theater but throughout the Army.



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We didn't stop there. We reevaluated how ROZs were established and implemented a permanent ROZ to replace our old Shadow UAS airfield (Bali) on the outskirts of Grafenwöhr Training Area in Germany.

This allowed us to experiment and train on the latest tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) inspired by lessons from the fight in Ukraine. It was a game-changer, and I'm proud of how we pushed boundaries to ensure our formation was primed for the challenges ahead.

Different Faces of Resistance

Not all resistance looks the same. In my experience, this is where good NCOs stand apart; they can spot the difference and respond accordingly. You'll encounter the full spectrum of pushbacks; the key is to diagnose which one you face.

- **Open defiance:** Might require direct, on-the-spot correction and a clear restatement of the mission's importance.
- **Quiet, passive resistance:** Often requires more subtle leadership, pulling Soldiers aside, seeking to understand the hesitation, and making them part of the solution.
- **Simple, well-intentioned caution:** Might require a reassuring and deliberate style of leadership to confirm the path is clear and get everyone oriented in the same direction.

Critically, not all resistance is negative. Sometimes what appears as opposition is a signal from your Soldiers telling you, "We need clarity (why/purpose)," "We need training," or "We need resources." This is where the most effective leaders can shift their mindset. I like to say that listening isn't a weakness, it's reconnaissance.

Treat listening as your battlefield reconnaissance. It allows you to survey the terrain, identify the strong points of resistance, and select your point of attack. With that intelligence, your effort isn't wasted; it is applied with precision against the barriers that matter most.

Don't be the NCO who crushes caution with authority, because it ensures you'll never hear about a potential problem until it's too late to correct it.

Here is one powerful example. While training Ukrainian battalions, Soldiers expressed a desire for more realistic training involving drones, but we were limited by safety constraints.

Instead of dismissing their request as unfeasible, the leadership team listened. The feedback was direct:

Soldiers believed they could build droppers and use inert, soft munitions as a training aide.

Empowered by leadership's trust, a few Soldiers 3D printed and tested the first functional dropper in a single weekend using tech-craft. We secured approval, and the training value increased exponentially. The solution came directly from the ranks because leadership treated their input as valuable intelligence.

The same principle applies to overcoming bureaucratic inertia. In another case, a food truck owned by an outside unit sat unused in their motor pool. Our Soldiers wanted better food options, but every official attempt to use the truck was met with miles of red tape.

Instead of giving up, we did our reconnaissance, navigated the bureaucracy, and identified the one person with the actual authority to say "yes."

A simple agreement later, the food truck was a smashing success. This initiative even sparked "food truck challenges" among our culinary specialists, who competed with their own unique menus, boosting morale and giving them real-world experience for their future careers.

It was a simple win that proved a powerful lesson: Sometimes the greatest acts of leadership have nothing to do with combat and everything to do with caring for your Soldiers.

These examples, one from a direct training request and the other from a quality-of-life issue, prove the same point. When you treat feedback as reconnaissance, you don't just solve problems, you solve the right problems.

The NCO Playbook for Breaking Through Resistance

Breaking resistance begins with building trust and credibility with Soldiers. NCOs don't overcome resistance with rank alone. They do it through strategy, presence, and grit.

It's a consistent, deliberate effort by enlisted leadership to cultivate a workplace environment that fosters trust. I've learned that Soldiers accept change more readily when they trust the leader presenting it. Credibility makes buy-in possible.

Resistance breaks when NCOs communicate the significance behind tasks, orders, and responsibilities. Communicating the "why" or "so what" of an initiative provides critical context and keeps Soldiers informed, creating an environment in which Mission Command can succeed.

Sometimes initiatives fail simply because leaders couldn't explain why they mattered. If you don't tie change to readiness, lethality, or Soldier welfare, people will check out before the idea even leaves the motor pool.



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Bring Soldiers into the process. I've always believed that involvement creates ownership. There's a vested interest in success, and that sort of open exchange of ideas builds trust. Soldiers resist change imposed on them, not change made with their investment and assistance.

Stand out as an enlisted leader with solutions by understanding how processes work and where bureaucracy can be outmaneuvered. This is where great NCOs shine. Solid NCOs learn the system so they can successfully influence it legally, ethically, and effectively. That means:

- Knowing the difference between binding regulations and outdated habits
- Finding the actual approval authority
- Understanding risk acceptance levels
- Predicting friction points before they stall progress
- Speaking staff sections' and headquarters' language

Too many great ideas died because no one understood the administrative terrain. When NCOs master the system, bureaucracy becomes an obstacle rather than a dead end.



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Finally, leveraging support from the chain of command and staying persistent in messaging, intent, and necessity of action demonstrates a commitment that Soldiers may find aspirational.

The right endorsement from command can turn slow, hesitant policy adoption, transformations, or ideas into enthusiastic support. If I've learned anything, it's that resistance often fades only after leaders prove their resolve remains constant.

The NCO Corps is the backbone of modernization. We turn concepts into action, enforce standards, mentor future leaders, and challenge outdated norms.

In my experience, when NCOs embrace adaptability, the entire formation follows. When NCOs resist change, the formation digs in even deeper. Being a change agent isn't about comfort. It's about courage, risk acceptance, and the relentless pursuit of improvement.

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Conclusion

Adopting this barrier-breaking mindset has done more than just change my tactics; it has reinvigorated my purpose as a leader. Battles against inertia were replaced by a crystal-clear mission: to relentlessly find and exploit every advantage that enhances our Soldiers' lethality and increases their survivability.

Resistance in the force is inevitable, but it is not immovable. The choice for every NCO is simple: accept the status quo or become the "Kool-Aid Man" for your formation. It's a decision to embody the courage required to break barriers, drive change, and lead the future of our Army. ■

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