



Multidomain operations (MDO) and large-scale combat operations (LSCO) require sergeants major who are not only efficient leaders but also lethal advisors capable of shaping operations at the battalion and brigade levels. (U.S. Army Photo by Sgt. Lukas Sparks)

Building the Lethal Sergeant Major: Staff Proficiency as the Foundation of Senior Enlisted Leadership

By Sgt. Maj. Jermaine Render

Sergeants Major Course

Multidomain operations (MDO) and large-scale combat operations (LSCO) require sergeants major who are not only efficient leaders but also lethal advisors capable of shaping operations at the battalion and brigade levels. Lethality in this context is not limited to the ability to destroy the enemy; it encompasses the intellectual agility, staff proficiency, and strategic comprehension required to synchronize warfighting functions and influence commanders'

decisions (Department of the Army, 2019a; Fox, 2021; Trachik et al., 2025).

Background/Context

The Army's Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System (NCOPDS) develops leadership capacity progressively. Doctrine requires staff sergeants and sergeants first class to demonstrate mastery of tactical leadership and small unit operations, often

leading platoons or serving in key company-level roles (Department of the Army, 2019a; Department of the Army, 2020). While these roles are critical, they rarely provide sustained exposure to battalion or brigade staff processes. As a result, many mid-grade NCOs advance without developing staff competencies in requisite skills like operational planning, synchronization, and coordination. By the time these NCOs reach a Sergeants Major Course, they encounter a steep learning curve that earlier, deliberate development could have mitigated.

This gap is especially problematic in LSCOs, where staff proficiency directly impacts readiness. Units often devote significant energy to badge-testing events such as the Expert Infantryman Badge (EIB), Expert Soldier Badge (ESB), and Expert Field Medical Badge (EFMB). When leaders intentionally balance these efforts with sustained individual and staff training, Soldiers are better prepared for the complex demands of combat rotations (Perry & Fenrick, 2020). Staff NCOs who understand how to resource training, protect time, and integrate individual skills into collective tasks are essential for bridging this gap. Without deliberate staff development at the mid-grade level, the Army risks undermining mission command and the operations process, creating a systemic gap that explains the genesis of the problem.

Genesis of the Problem

The Army's challenge is not simply preparing NCOs to succeed at the Sergeants Major Course; it is ensuring that future sergeants major are lethal advisors and efficient leaders in LSCO and MDO. Research from the U.S. Army War College explained that senior NCOs often arrive at strategic assignments without adequate preparation, creating capability shortfalls that burden commanders (Connelly, 2013). Units create the problem when they delay staff proficiency until senior levels, a trend observed in LSCO training cycles where divisions neglect sustained staff and individual development once collective training begins (Perry & Fenrick, 2020).

Leaders who excel tactically often struggle when transitioning into staff roles, where success requires integrating information, synchronizing warfighting functions, and maintaining shared understanding in complex operational environments. Archambault (2019), drawing on observations of brigade staffs at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), identifies this lack of staff readiness as a persistent shortfall across formations.

Without early exposure, NCOs lack the experience to synchronize warfighting functions, anticipate operational demands, and provide commanders with the insights that make the senior enlisted advisor indispensable, including the ability to measure and enhance confidence, resilience, and cohesion that underpins combat lethality (Trachik et al., 2025).

Doctrine supports this analysis. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, reminds leaders that leadership is the combat power element that unifies warfighting functions by influencing others through purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization (Department of the Army, 2019a).



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ADP 5-0, *The Operations Process*, stresses that the operations process is the Army's framework for exercising command and control, and the staff is essential to the commander's success in mission command by enabling understanding, decision-making, control, and communication that synchronize operations and ensure mission accomplishment (Department of the Army, 2019c).

ADP 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, emphasizes that mission command is the Army's approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision-making and decentralized execution, enabling commanders to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative (Department of the Army, 2019b).

Staff NCOs who understand these principles early are better prepared to support commanders in exercising initiative and adaptability, making them efficient and

lethal advisors in LSCO. Delayed staff proficiency shows up clearly in the career paths of NCOs whose early staff experiences, or lack of them, shape their ability to become efficient and lethal advisors.

My career demonstrates the importance of early staff exposure and aligns with the leadership principles outlined in ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, which emphasizes developing competence through experience, self-study, and deliberate practice. As a staff sergeant (2003-2004), I served as an equal opportunity leader for 10 companies, briefing the command team every two weeks. That experience introduced me to staff processes and the coordination required to support commanders, an early example of the leadership-through-influence competency described in ADP 6-22.



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Later, as a sergeant first class (2004-2008), I worked in a battalion S2 developing target packages, maps, and briefings before serving 39 months as a scout platoon sergeant. These roles reinforced the principles in ADP 5-0, *The Operations Process*, particularly the requirement for staff sections to integrate information, maintain shared understanding, and enable timely decisions. Over time, I gained the knowledge and training to design tactical operations centers (TOCs) and tactical command posts (TACs) from the Army level down to the battalion level. This work deepened my understanding of how staff enablers synchronize operations in accordance with the core responsibilities described in Field Manual (FM) 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*.

Subsequent assignments, including service as an Eighth Army battle NCO and security manager (2011-2013), squadron S2 NCOIC (2013-2015), squadron S3 NCOIC (2015), and squadron operations sergeant (2016), enforced how staff proficiency directly affects unit effectiveness. These experiences reflected the doctrinal expectation that NCOs contribute to planning, preparation, execution, and assessment, as described in both ADP 5-0 and FM 3-0, *Operations*. Even as a first sergeant (2016-2018) and later as an assistant inspector general (2018), staff work remained central to advising commanders and shaping organizational outcomes, consistent with the leadership responsibilities outlined in ADP 6-22.

Failure also reinforced these lessons. As a young sergeant first class in the S2 staff section, I prepared targeting data for a battalion operation but failed to coordinate with the fires and operations sections. The resulting briefing lacked synchronization, delaying the commander's decisions and reducing confidence in my work. This experience illustrated the doctrinal requirement for staff integration and collaboration described in FM 6-0, which states that staff sections must synchronize warfighting functions to support the commander's decision-making (Department of the Army, 2022). It also highlighted why NCOs must develop staff proficiency earlier in their careers to meet the demands of large-scale combat operations.

Later, I served as the operations sergeant major for an infantry battalion without the traditional air assault, pathfinder, ranger, or airborne certifications. During a JRTC rotation, the battalion commander told me I had an exceptional grasp of staff operations and the tactical operations center. That acknowledgment validated years of deliberate study, practice, and integration behaviors consistent with the self-development domain in ADP 6-22. It reinforced that mastery of staff processes is not only a personal achievement but also a foundation for institutional solutions that deliberately develop staff proficiency across the force, ensuring units can meet the synchronization and decision support requirements outlined in ADP 5-0 and FM 6-0.

Developing Solutions Through Staff Integration

To prevent NCOs from having to learn lessons the hard way and develop sergeants major who are both efficient and lethal advisors, the Army must deliberately cultivate staff proficiency at the mid-grade NCO level. Each solution below directly contributes to shaping

leaders who can synchronize operations, anticipate demands, and advise commanders in LSCO and MDO. In a perfect world, the solution to developing these highly skilled senior NCOs might look like this:

- **Rotational Staff Assignments:** Battalion and brigade commanders, in coordination with CSMs, should assign high-performing staff sergeants and sergeants first class to staff positions for limited periods (6-12 months). Selection must be based on demonstrated adaptability and potential, not as a holding area for underperforming NCOs. When leaders intentionally select and develop NCOs for staff roles, the experience becomes a powerful growth opportunity. Using staff positions as a fallback for struggling Soldiers can create the perception that staff work is punitive rather than developmental. Properly managed rotations build efficiency in planning and coordination, laying the foundation for lethal advisory capacity at the senior level.

- **Scenario-Based Training:** Operations officers and senior staff NCOs run staff-focused exercises and leadership professional development courses at the battalion and brigade levels. Embedding staff scenarios into CPXs or field training events exposes mid-grade NCOs to the military decision-making process (MDMP) and staff development. This deliberate practice strengthens tactical expertise while building the analytical skills required for lethal decision-making in LSCO, aligning with observations that brigade staffs often arrive at CTCs unprepared to fight as cohesive teams and require realistic, scenario-driven repetitions to develop shared understanding and synchronization (Archambault, 2019).

- **Coaching and Mentorship Programs:** Pairing mid-grade NCOs with experienced staff NCOs or officers provides guidance and feedback. Leaders embed these programs into existing battle rhythm events, such as weekly perspectives on strategic planning.

- **Curriculum Adjustments:** NCOPDS should expand to include staff operations earlier in the NCO career timeline. The



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MDMP is already incorporated into the Master Leader Course (MLC), and collaboration with the Directorate of Training and Education (DOTE) can ensure modules emphasize practical staff application. Early doctrinal education aligns with Army guidance that leaders must understand and contribute to the operations process and develop proficiency through realistic, progressive training (Department of the Army, 2019a; Department of the Army, 2019b). Such adjustments build efficiency in staff responsibilities and develop the intellectual lethality required for NCOs to advise commanders effectively.

- **Command Sergeant Major Emphasis:** Battalion and brigade command sergeants major should deliberately place mid-grade NCOs in staff roles, framing them as essential preparation for future strategic responsibilities. Deliberate talent management at the battalion and brigade levels ensures high-performing NCOs gain early exposure to staff processes, shared understanding, and the operations process that are competencies required of senior enlisted leaders in LSCO and MDO. This emphasis treats staff proficiency as a critical pathway to developing efficient and lethal sergeants major.

Conclusion

The Army's future fight requires sergeants major who embody both efficiency and lethality. These leaders must be able to advise commanders, synchronize operations, and anticipate the demands of multidomain battlefields. Units cannot achieve that level of effectiveness when they

delay staff proficiency until the Sergeants Major Course. Deliberately building staff skills at the staff sergeant and sergeant first class levels strengthens the Army's ability to produce leaders who excel tactically, think strategically, and operate lethally. ■



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Sgt. Maj. Jermaine Render serves as an instructor at the Sergeants Major Course, Department of Army Operations. He entered the Army in 1997 as a 19D armored reconnaissance specialist and has built a career marked by progressive leadership and educational stewardship. His professional focus centers on adult education, curriculum development, and the advancement of senior noncommissioned officers. He is currently pursuing a Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Design, scheduled for completion in July 2027.



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