

GUNNER'S SEAT

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Mission Command and Mentorship

"The education of a man is never completed until he dies." –Robert E. Lee

This issue of **ARMOR** magazine focuses on our efforts toward mission command that, by definition, defies orderly, efficient and precise control but asks all junior leaders to take initiative, make informed decisions and act within the commander's intent. I ask myself, what is the noncommissioned officer's role in mission command? If the intent of mission command is to empower agile and adaptive leaders in their conduct of operations, how do we, as the enlisted adviser to a commander, enable that? We will focus our efforts on what NCOs in the U.S. Army have always done: training, educating and mentoring. With this in mind, we must preserve both the gains and knowledge of the last 13 years while reinforcing the enduring principles that made us successful prior to 2001.

The NCO has long been entrusted as the primary trainer in our profession. As ADRP 7-0, **Training Units and Developing Leaders**,

states, "[NCOs] are the primary trainers of enlisted Soldiers, crews and small teams. NCOs take broad guidance from their leaders; identify the necessary tasks, standards and resources; and then plan, prepare, execute and assess training. They ensure their Soldiers demonstrate proficiency in their individual military-occupational specialty skills, warrior tasks and battle drills. NCOs instill in Soldiers discipline, resiliency, the Warrior Ethos and Army Values. In their assessment, NCOs provide feedback on task proficiency and the quality of the training."

This sounds to me like the essence of mission command: commanders empowering their subordinates to perform their mission. However, we must get back into the weeds in making this happen. The ability to assess our formations, plan, prepare and execute training, and then evaluate and retrain our Soldiers, has become an atrophied skill requiring all our organizations to immediately address this shortfall. We must never forget that the primary

duty of a sergeant is to train. Good NCOs know the level of training of every Soldier in their charge, and how prepared that Soldier is to react to stressful situations – like combat.

Educating the force means far more than getting Soldiers to NCO Education System courses or taking college courses. As ADRP 6-22 states, "Lifelong learning involves study and reflection to acquire new knowledge and to learn how to apply it when needed." Leaders have neither the time nor the opportunity to learn every lesson in a classroom. We must take upon ourselves the responsibility to seek self-improvement and gain knowledge through self-study. Education and self-study have been important aspects of leadership development since our inception. Lifelong learning is not only the domain of the officer corps; NCOs take on active learning for both our own development and to impart that desire into our Soldiers, who will lead future Soldiers in the next conflict.

We are not only the backbone of our profession; NCOs provide continuity in our organizations. As we transition from a decade of war, our NCO corps will provide solid grounding in individual and team tasks as well as an education in the nature and character of war to best prepare Soldiers for combat, lead them in battle and accomplish the next mission. Moreover, as young sergeants become platoon sergeants, first sergeants and sergeants major, our commitment to learning across a career is vital to growth as a leader and preparation for increased responsibility.

As NCOs, we may not overlook our responsibility to mentor junior members of the profession, or our responsibility to develop our Soldiers as future mentors. Consider – for the specialist in your formation who will someday be a platoon sergeant, his prospective platoon leader is in the sixth grade right now! You can develop that young specialist's ability to not only mentor other NCOs but also begin

to teach him how to mentor his platoon leader. In the not-too-distant future, he will contribute to the development of both a strong officer corps and a bench of future company and battalion commanders. The NCO/officer relationship remains critically important. It takes practice and hard work to develop the trust of our officers so they feel they can come to you with problems and you will have the knowledge, advice and recommendations on how to fix it.

All this ties back to mission command – being able to make informed decisions and learning from honest mistakes to accomplish the mission is the goal and is key to our mentorship of both the NCO and officer corps. MAJ Joe Byerly, an instructor at the Cavalry Leaders Course, wrote a outstanding blog on the ***Small Wars Journal*** Website titled "The Guy Behind the Guy Behind the Guy" on the importance of and the influence that mentors had on two key figures in military history. While not specifically directed at NCOs, I

encourage everyone to read this well-written piece as it highlights how a mentor, while never becoming famous himself, can affect the career of others. I do not know who Eisenhower's, Patton's or Petraeus' first platoon sergeants were, or who their first sergeant was while they were company commanders, but you can bet they were influential on the style and method of leadership they chose.

In closing, I am reminded of the NCO vision: "An NCO corps grounded in heritage, values and tradition that embodies the Warrior Ethos; values perpetual learning; and is capable of leading, training and motivating Soldiers." This charges us as members of this time-honored corps to not only seek out the inherent responsibility found in training, educating and mentoring, but to look deeper into establishing a climate that uses mission command as not just a buzzword but as a way of ensuring the continued success of our Army.

Scouts Out!