

The Overlooked Mentors

by MAJ Terron Wharton

My military journey started in 1997 the day I walked into my first high-school Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) class, where I met retired SFC Alan Conrad. Conrad had served 20 years in Special Forces and then retired to his hometown to teach at his old high school. He was a huge part of why I joined the military, and he had a major impact on my leadership style. Ten years later, as I patrolled in Baghdad as a platoon leader, I encountered many moral and ethical dilemmas. In every case, one thought always came to my mind: What would Conrad think of my actions?

Without knowing it, Conrad became my first mentor. He taught and instilled a work ethic, persevering spirit and moral foundation that would serve me at West Point, in Baghdad's streets and on Afghanistan's hills. I am proud to say we still keep in touch, and this past year he made the trip to Fort Leavenworth to promote me to major.

We often talk about mentoring junior officers and how important it is for senior officers to find and develop protégées. I have two senior-officer mentors, one active and one retired, who have been invaluable and irreplaceable in the things they have done for my growth and development.

What we overlook is that the most important mentor for a young officer is not a senior officer. It is a noncommissioned officer (NCO). At each stage of my career, it was an NCO who molded, shaped and developed me into the leader I am today. NCO mentorship is critical to an officer's success – a criticality that, while acknowledged to a degree, is drastically understated.

NCOs are the primary mentors in the three most critical stages of officer development: the cadet, the platoon leader and the company commander. Unfortunately, NCO mentorship's criticality to officer development is often overlooked by both the officer and NCO corps. However, better understanding this criticality will enable the Army to leverage this relationship to improve junior officer leader development.

Establishing character in cadets

NCOs are present at every level of officer professional military education (PME) from cadet to captain. Every Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program and cadet company at West Point has a tactical NCO. Cadet summer training is led by NCOs. The primary instructors at my Armor Officer Basic Course (OBC) were NCOs. Officer PME contains a heavy NCO presence until the captain's career course.

Retired MSG James Gentile, my former first sergeant, finished his Army career as an ROTC instructor. He said he strongly believed that early interaction with mature, experienced NCOs helped cadets establish good foundations, a view that grew stronger after he taught ROTC.

"Listening to their concerns regarding development made me wish I had that assignment prior to becoming a platoon sergeant. I learned that despite being a new platoon leader, these were people/leaders who truly cared and were passionate about leading teams in complex environments and wanting to win. ... Their No. 1 fear was they would not be competent enough at first and would potentially lose credibility in the beginning of their tenure. I found that part not surprising but was shocked at how much importance they placed on that vs. the other leadership attributes, especially personal character."

At the cadet stage, NCO mentorship should focus on the single most important officer trait: character. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, **Army Leadership**, defines character as the leader's values and identity. Further, it states leaders with a strong, values-based identity offer an example for followers to emulate. Conversely, it posits that a leader's lack of confidence could stem from lacking a strong idea of their own identity. In short, who are **you** as a person and as a **leader**, and what is that based on?

Any college-age kid has a hard enough time figuring out who they are as a person, let alone as an Army leader. However, that sense of identity, rooted in values, will establish a leader's character. This is why the NCO's role in cadet development should center on character demonstrated by example. By modeling the Army Values, the NCO-officer relationship and professionalism, cadets get a comprehensive example of what "right looks like," both in themselves as leaders and the NCOs with whom they will serve.

Molding future leaders begins at the pre-commissioning stage and has a lasting impact. This is especially true when helping to mold and establish character rooted in the Army Values, morals and ethical behavior.

Need proof?

Nearly 20 years after our first meeting, every tough decision I make is accompanied by the same question: What would Conrad think of my actions?

Critical takeaways:

- **Mentorship focus:** Character.
- **For all:** NCO mentorship plays a critical role in officer development during the early years of an officer's career that will help define how those officers lead Soldiers during their careers.
- **For cadets:** How does my tactical NCO embody the Army Values and professionalism? How do they interact with their officer counterparts?
- **For NCOs:** My actions have a tangible, lasting impact on shaping future officers. How am I modeling the Army Values and professionalism? How am I modeling the NCO role in the NCO-officer relationship? Am I taking an active role in developing the cadet or am I simply following the program of instruction?

Growing platoon-leader competence

I met my platoon sergeant, SFC Victor Gutierrez, on a late afternoon deep in the Fort Hood, TX, training area. He was waiting at the company command post to grab me, and as I exited the humvee, he walked up, saluted and laid out the next 12 hours: What would happen, what I'd say when I met the platoon, how I would brief my operations order, the things I'd say to my tank commanders, and the way I'd deliver my opord. I gave a rather stunned "Why, yes, that sounds good. We'll do that." Over the next three hours I saw that Gutierrez had set me up for success, ensuring I made an excellent first impression with the platoon and my NCOs. It was the start of a great relationship that lasts to this day.

Gutierrez acted as a sounding board, giving advice and teaching me my craft. He possessed never-ending patience and would let me step in it (as long as it didn't violate ethics or place a Soldier at risk) so I would learn from my mistakes. Most of all, he led by example. That example, attention to detail, adherence to standards and the importance of presence made a permanent impact I've carried forward through my whole career.

NCOs are the Army's primary teachers, trainers and instructors, and SFC Conrad Vasquez said he believes that role covers officers as well as Soldiers. Vasquez served as a platoon sergeant for nearly four years, as a first sergeant for two more, and he is now with the University of Oregon ROTC program. His opinion on the NCO role was very blunt: "If you see a jacked-up company commander, chances are he had a jacked-up platoon sergeant when he was a platoon leader."

Vasquez served as one of my platoon sergeants while I was in command. Before every range, field-training exercise, gunnery or lane, I would see Vasquez off with his platoon leader, helping the lieutenant rehearse opords, going over parts of the plan or teaching a new tactic, technique or procedure. Whether employing fires, setting a screen line or teaching shooting techniques on the range, Vasquez trained his platoon leader as much as he trained his Soldiers.

Vasquez helped instill a high level of competence that demonstrated itself in his platoon leader's behavior, confidence and how the lieutenant led his platoon. Did the lieutenant have potential?

Yes, he did.

Did I have a role as his commander?

Of course.

However, Vasquez was the primary mentor who molded and developed that potential. When I look at that officer today, I see Vasquez, not myself.

Note that ADP 6-22 defines three categories of competencies: "The Army leader serves to lead others; to develop the environment, themselves, others and the profession as a whole; and to achieve organizational goals. Competencies provide a clear and consistent way of conveying expectations for Army leaders."

Competency is how officers lead and influence Soldiers, accomplish missions and maintain a positive command climate rooted in Army Values, morals and ethics. ADP 6-22 further describes that leader competencies can be grown and that growth happens somewhere very specific: the direct-leadership level. For officers it does not get more direct than being a platoon leader.

At the cadet level, the NCO focused on mentoring character to provide a foundation. At the platoon leader-platoon sergeant level, the NCO should focus mentorship on competence to build upon that foundation. Both Gutierrez and Vasquez had a single focus: ensure their officer knows his job so he can lead effectively in combat. In both cases, character and judgment were mentored as issues arose, but the day-to-day focus was on teaching the platoon leader his craft.

Platoon sergeants have seen many officers, good and bad, during their careers. The platoon leader arrives with a (relatively) blank slate, while the platoon sergeant has greater experience, technical and tactical knowledge, time in service and a higher maturity level. At this point in their careers, new officers will have very few examples of how NCOs should act, what they should know or what they should do. As a result, new officers typically look back on two things. First, what did their officer instructors tell them their platoon sergeants should be like? Second, what examples did their tactical NCOs and OBC instructors set?

If those expectations are positive and platoon sergeants understand their role and position, typically mentorship can begin fairly easily. However, if cadets saw NCOs modeling poor values, low competence and unprofessional behavior, it can breed suspicion of NCOs in general. This can make it hard to establish the trust necessary for mentorship to occur.

The platoon leader-platoon sergeant relationship is special. An officer never forgets his first platoon sergeant, whether the NCO was good or bad. Similarly, a platoon sergeant never forgets the first platoon leader he trains. For the officer, being a platoon leader marks the first step in his or her career. For the NCO, this is his or her first real leadership job as a senior NCO. Instead of reducing this relationship to clichés, we need to appreciate what it (the relationship) is to maximize it when developing junior officers.

Critical takeaways:

- **Mentorship focus:** Competence.
- **For all:** NCOs mentor platoon leaders to increase their competence, thereby building on a character-based foundation established during pre-commissioning.
- **For platoon leaders:** How will I establish trust with my platoon sergeant? Does the example my tactical NCOs and OBC instructors set match what my platoon sergeant does? Why or why not? How will I use my platoon sergeant to increase my competence?
- **For NCOs:** How will I establish trust with my platoon leader? Does my platoon leader have a solid character-based foundation? What am I doing to ensure the platoon leader knows his or her craft?

Developing commander's judgment

As a cavalry-troop commander, I was fortunate to have Gentile as my initial first sergeant. Gentile had already been a platoon sergeant and a first sergeant for two other commanders. I met him on a small combat outpost in Kandahar City, Afghanistan, and he had incredible impact on mentoring me as a troop commander. We started every morning with coffee, a cigarette and talk: old business, new business, his thoughts on how the troop was doing, and even my own concerns and doubts.

A defining trait for our troop was disciplined Soldiers. One day, as will happen in command, a Soldier screwed up and landed before my desk. This Soldier had been in the troop a while, but he was a relatively new NCO. Still, he was very good at his job. I really did not want to take any action other than a slap on the wrist. However, there was a problem: the screw-up involved a sensitive item and had occurred in front of other Soldiers. The NCO had directly set conditions for the equipment to be stolen and, despite the item being recovered, this was a pretty big lapse in judgment on his part.

I had constantly preached discipline, justice and holding people accountable regardless of their rank. I certainly did not want to ruin the NCO's career, but I had few options. In a moment of intense personal conflict, Gentile told me

something I would never forget: “Sir, at the end of the day it comes down to this: Do we have the strength to do what the Army tells us to do as leaders?” That was it: black and white, right and wrong, a single standard.

I let the NCO keep his stripes, but the cost was steep. I suspended the loss of rank but took the maximum amount of pay I could, and maxed him out on restriction and extra duty. On top of that, we were a week from coming home from deployment, and his restriction and extra duty would not start until we returned. I held the NCO accountable, sick to my stomach the whole time, but the lesson stuck with both of us. Doing anything else would have been abdicating my legal and moral responsibility. I had heard that time and again from more senior officers, but I learned it from Gentile that day.

Over those morning coffee-and-cigarette sessions, Gentile mentored me by molding, shaping and refining my sense of judgment. My officer mentors gave it to me in stark, discrete terms. Gentile helped me understand the nuance, to read the unit’s pulse and adjust accordingly, and to ensure my actions communicated my intent. He taught me how to be a commander by living what he preached: standards, discipline, attention to detail and knowing your craft. Most of all, he helped develop my sense of judgment.

ADP 6-22 does not mention judgment directly but captures it under the “intellect” leader attribute: “The leader’s intellect affects how well a leader thinks about problems, creates solutions, makes decisions and leads others. ... Sound judgment enables the best decision for the situation at hand. It is a key attribute of the transformation of knowledge into understanding and quality execution.”

The ADP makes a critical point: It is not enough for the officer to have knowledge to execute sound judgment. Intellect’s awareness must advance to understanding and must be actively applied, not passively maintained.

Do I take rank or just pay? Do I take Uniformed Code of Military Justice action at all? Do I formally counsel, or sit down and have a heart-to-heart talk? Do I chew ass or give praise? Do I hang out with the Soldiers and clean weapons after mission, or do I keep distance? Am I being too hard or too soft? Am I communicating the right commander’s intent with my action or not? Learning the answers to those questions is the essence of a commander’s judgment.

There is no other responsibility like command. I could drastically alter someone’s life with a single word or stroke of pen. I could take rank and pay, erasing years of work and imposing financial burden. I could send a Soldier to jail. Most of all, my decisions in combat, right or wrong, could cost Soldiers their lives, potentially widowing a spouse of orphaning a child. That weight is tremendous.

Judgment comes from the character established during the cadet years and the competence grown as a platoon leader. Applying these to a situation and making a decision is judgment. Company commanders have tremendous responsibilities when exercising judgment. However, the key is establishing good judgment during the company-command years before the impact grows exponentially. A company commander can send a man to jail; a general can send a man to prison. I can take a specialist’s rank and pay; a brigade commander can end a 15-year career. My bad judgment in combat may kill a squad; a battalion commander’s bad judgment could kill a whole company. Therefore, an NCO’s ability to mentor, or failure in mentoring judgment, can have serious implications for hundreds or thousands of Soldiers in the future.

Critical takeaways:

- **Mentorship focus:** Judgment.
- **For all:** The judgment officers develop as company commanders will typically follow throughout their careers with greater repercussions the higher they ascend.
- **For company commanders:** How does my first sergeant exercise judgment in Soldier issues? How does my judgment tie into “good order and discipline?” What are indicators that my judgment has been good or poor?
- **For NCOs:** Does my commander have any character or competence flaws that must be addressed? How do I help my commander evaluate his or her personal judgment? How do I shape my commander’s judgment?

Tying it all together

I have had many influential NCOs throughout my career – for example, Conrad as a JROTC instructor, Gutierrez as my platoon sergeant and Gentile as my first sergeant. Each one provided mentorship during critical, formative years that informed and solidified the leadership and mentorship style I use today. However, the NCO role in officer mentorship is often reduced to cliché soundbites. Officers hear: “Listen to your platoon sergeant and first sergeant” and NCOs hear: “Don’t let your officer screw it up.”

If both sides reduce the NCO mentorship role to clichés, this prevents us from taking full advantage of NCO mentorship when developing junior officers. NCO mentorship to cadets establishes character rooted in Army Values. This character provides a foundation for the platoon sergeant to grow his or her platoon leader’s competence. Together, character and competence gives the first sergeant the basis to begin developing a company commander’s judgment. The next stage builds on the previous, and an uncorrected flaw early on becomes harder and harder to repair in the future.

Unfortunately, these flaws can impact the lives of hundreds – possibly thousands – of Soldiers and their families as the officer advances through the ranks. Also, at high enough levels, these flaws can affect strategic partnerships and civil-military relations, and they can impact operational and strategic success. By not giving the NCO mentorship role the emphasis it deserves, we risk both sides not taking it seriously. Not taking it seriously risks losing out on a golden opportunity to truly shape future leaders for the better.

So what is the key to NCOs effectively mentoring officers?

Gutierrez, Gentile and Vasquez all said variations of the same: trust, character and competence. Each believed trust was the most important. The relationship must be founded on trust, candor and honesty. Trust allows the NCO to develop the officer’s competence and character. However, if an NCO loses trust, or it fails to develop at all, none of the NCO’s knowledge or skills matter. The officer is no longer receptive.

Character comes into focus when trust is established. Vasquez was adamant about NCOs helping to shape character. I vividly remember Gutierrez and the tone and look he would give me when I said something that even alluded to choosing an easier path over doing the harder, correct thing. Every NCO must reinforce Army Values, standards and discipline through leading by example. Gentile said he believes NCOs who can articulate what personal courage, values and professionalism mean in everyday leadership challenges will help their officers navigate tough decisions as they arise.

Competence comes to the fore once trust is established and character has been reinforced. As such, NCOs are the Army’s subject-matter experts, teachers and trainers, and part of their responsibility is to share that knowledge with their officers. NCOs must take an active role in developing their officer’s competence, whether that’s fire and maneuver, how to write NCO Evaluation Reports or planning. Developing an officer’s competence gives him or her the confidence and skills to lead effectively.

There is a reason every officer has an NCO counterpart. As cadets, platoon leaders and company commanders, officers are exploring, developing and refining their leadership style. NCO advice and mentorship is critical during this time to crystalize how officers will lead Soldiers the rest of their careers.

Need proof?

Nearly 20 years after our first meeting, every tough decision I make is still accompanied by the same internal question: What would Conrad think of my actions?

Critical takeaways:

- **Mentorship focus:** Tactical NCOs establish character in cadets. Platoon sergeants grow competence in platoon leaders. First sergeants develop judgment in company commanders.
- **For all:** Each level of mentorship builds on the previous. Flaws early in the process become more difficult to correct as time goes on.
- **For officers:** Am I making the most out of my relationship with my NCO? Have I set the conditions for mentorship or simply mission accomplishment?

- **For NCOs:** Am I making the most of my opportunity to shape the officer corps? Have I set the conditions to enable mentorship, or am I just focused on mission accomplishment? Are there flaws in my officer's development that I must stop and correct before proceeding with the current level of mentorship?

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Figure 1. SFC Mark Leavens, right, issues a troop-level operations order to fellow students during the reconnaissance phase of the Cavalry Leader's Course at Fort Benning, GA. NCOs are the primary mentors in the three most critical stages of officer development: cadet, platoon leader and company commander. Unfortunately, the NCO mentorship's criticality to officer development is often overlooked by both the officer and NCO corps. However, better understanding this criticality will enable the Army to leverage this relationship to improve junior-officer leader development. (Photo by MAJ Joe Byerly)