

The Operations Sergeant Major

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As the culture of the Army evolves, NCOs face many challenges that if not addressed will be detrimental to future development of the NCO Corps. Those challenges come in the form of, “How we communicate, use technology, increase resilience, sustain tactical and technical proficiency, and inculcate ourselves and our Soldiers on ethics and values critical to maintaining an ‘Army Strong’ force.”¹ These challenges are overcome by recognizing areas of improvement and adapting to them. This article will attempt to clarify the operations sergeant major’s (OPS SGM’s) role and highlight modern trends identified at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) under realistic combat training scenarios. It will also include a recommended course of action aimed at preparing the OPS SGM to become a valued force multiplier for the unit.

The Operations Sergeant Major

Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 6-0.5, *Command Post Organization and Operations*, defines the OPS SGM as a senior NCO who oversees enlisted staff personnel and provides counsel to the operations officer. He or she is responsible for leading, guiding, and training Soldiers, as well as developing unit standard operating procedures and enforcing standards and discipline.²

Principally, the OPS SGM supervises the actions of the staff upon receipt of the executive officer’s (XO’s) guidance and provides advice to the XO when warranted to drive staff operations towards the mission goal. According to doctrine, the operations sergeant major reports to the operations officer; however, the OPS SGM assists all staff elements and should report to and provide counsel to the XO in all matters regarding the staff.³ The XO leads all staff elements, but the OPS SGM major drives all staff activities under the direction of the commander’s intent.⁴

To be successful, the OPS SGM must have a solid understanding of the following principles: NCO common core competencies, leadership, team building, and mission command. Combined and implemented, these concepts allows OPS SGMs to gain an understanding of their staffs’ capabilities, efficiently manage personnel, and align talented staff NCOs by areas of expertise under a coordinating, special or personal staff officer.⁵

According to SGM (Retired) Patrick Castin in an issue of *Battle Staff NCO Review*, during tactical operations, the OPS SGM should focus on the tactical command post (TAC), the rear command post, and the tactical operations center (TOC).⁶ The OPS SGM’s role is to make these command nodes act as a dynamic group as well as manage guard rosters, create rest plans, and maintain discipline within and around the command nodes. OPS SGMs also work with other staff NCOs to manage logistical requirements, tactical employment, and security procedures.⁷

Current Trends

The following are recent OPS SGM trends observed throughout multiple pre-deployment rotations at JRTC:

1. They don’t always fully utilize mission command philosophy.

2. They don't synergize their staffs to their strengths.
3. They need to understand the duties and responsibilities of their staff NCOs during the military decision-making process (MDMP).

Mission Command — OPS SGMs are often competent in several principles of mission command, to include mutual trust with their unit's staff NCOs, as well as understanding mission orders and risk mitigation. Yet throughout several JRTC rotations, some lacked understanding of commander's intent, disciplined initiative, and shared understanding. This can lead to a lack of resources for staff NCOs because there isn't a common understanding of current operations or mission objectives.

Staff Synergy — Often, OPS SGMs do not employ staff NCOs according to their strengths, which ultimately hinders their ability to exercise disciplined initiative within their staff elements.

Understanding Staff Responsibilities — OPS SGMs frequently lack full understanding of their staff's responsibilities and duties. This, coupled with the previously mentioned friction points, usually causes delays in managing staff processes.

Recommendations

The first recommendation to streamline the OPS SGM position is for doctrine to further specify whom the OPS SGM primarily advises to help define responsibilities. This prevents bias towards working solely with the operations section. Also, doctrine should specify that the OPS SGM provide counsel and manage all staff element processes, not just operations.

A second recommendation is to create an OPS SGM Course (OSMC). Although the Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A) focuses on creating agile and adaptive senior enlisted leaders, it does not fully prepare sergeants major in understanding an organization's operational approach at the tactical level. This limits the overall impact the OPS SGM has on the organization to achieve the commander's desired end state.⁸



Soldiers with the 2nd Battalion, 4th Security Force Assistance Brigade prepare for a mission in their tactical operations center at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, LA, on 3 June 2020. (Photo by Chuck Cannon)

An OSMC could expand upon institutional knowledge gained at the SGM-A, giving tactical-level sergeants major a foundation principled in organizational success. Similar to the Company Commanders and First Sergeants Pre-Command Course, the OSMC would be a requirement prior to assuming the role of operations sergeant major. The course curriculum should include topics on: Army team building, staff synchronization and MDMP integration, command post activities, and organizing combat power. Other topics of consideration are an overview of logistics, the unit schools program, range control operations, and live-fire/situational training exercises.

Conclusion

Properly defining the position of the OPS SGM is vital to the success of this role. By providing sergeants major with a thorough education on their responsibilities and expectations, the U.S. Army can create successful operations sergeants major who positively influence their organizations. This will build strong and cohesive combat ready units prepared for the future fight.

Notes

¹ Training Circular (TC) 7-22.7, *The Noncommissioned Officer Guide*, January 2020, vi, accessed from https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN20340_TC%207-22x7%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf.

² Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 6-0.5, *Command Post Organization and Operations*, March 2017, accessed from [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ATP%206-0_5%20\(final\).pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ATP%206-0_5%20(final).pdf).

³ ATP 6-0.5 and TC 7-22.7.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Field Manual (FM) 6.0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, May 2014, accessed from https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/NOCASE-FM_6-0-002-WEB-6.pdf.

⁶ SGM (Retired) Patrick Castin, "Battle Staff NCO Review: NCO Tactical Command Post SOP," Issue 08-04, accessed from <http://asktop.net/wp/download/16/NCO%20Tactical%20Command%20Post%20SOP.pdf>.

⁷ ATP 6-0.5.

⁸ Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 5.0, *The Operations Process*, July 2019, accessed from https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN18126-ADP_5-0-000-WEB-3.pdf.

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