

Instruction Is Leadership

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In 2016, I (CPT De Lancey) was a Stryker rifle platoon leader conducting a known distance (KD) range with a Thai counterpart platoon as part of Pacific Pathways. Everything was going according to plan: The ammunition point was set; standards were briefed; preliminary marksmanship instruction (PMI) was completed to standard; and remedial and concurrent training plans were established. We were well into the firing tables when my battalion commander arrived for a battlefield circulation visit.

After an initial inspection of the training, he pulled me aside and asked what manuals and doctrine I had read to prepare for the KD range. I admitted to not reading any training circular (TC) or doctrine in its entirety but attempted to match what I thought was his expectation by referencing chapters and sections on advanced marksmanship and KD firing tables. Visibly dissatisfied with my answer, he replied, “LT, we as professional Infantry officers do not REFERENCE doctrine — we thoroughly study, know, and implement doctrine.”

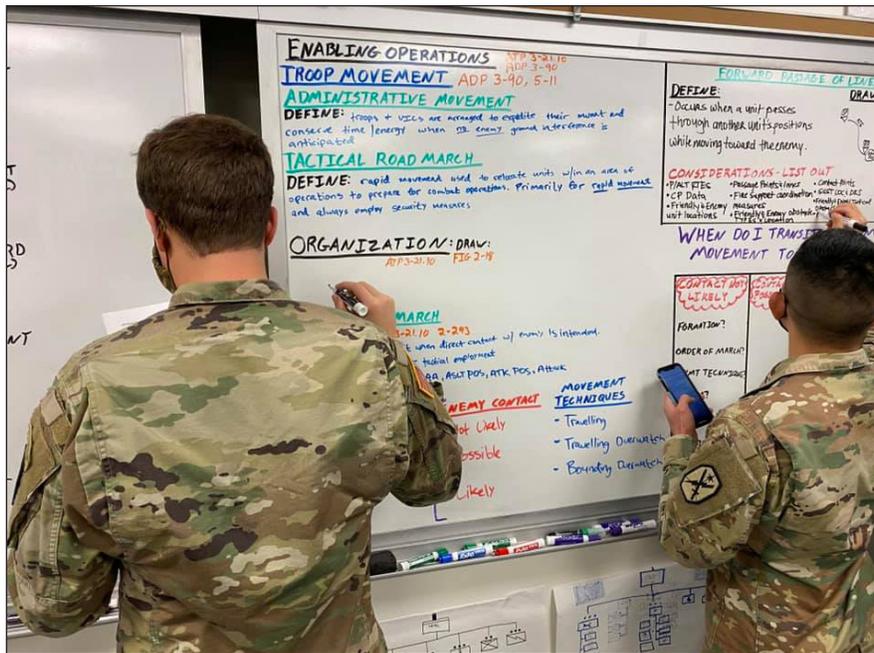
This incident was one of those informal leader development snapshots that has been more valuable and impactful than most deliberate leader professional development (LPD) programs I’ve experienced. It was the first real time in my young career to that point where doctrine and its importance were conveyed to me. It also viscerally illustrated that the best leaders are committed to simple, consistent moments of instruction to their subordinates. After that discussion, I researched, read, and to the best of my ability applied doctrinal concepts to everything my platoon did, which dramatically increased our capability and enhanced our contributions to the battalion. Additionally, not only did that simple conversation ignite my appreciation for doctrine, but it also ignited an appreciation for instruction as leadership and planted the original seed of my desire to serve as a small group leader (SGL) for the Maneuver Captains Career Course (MCCC) at Fort Benning, GA.

Amongst the myriad of highly attractive post-command broadening opportunities, serving as an SGL at MCCC deserves to be among your top choices. In this position, you’ll get a unique and challenging leadership experience; produce specific, tangible contributions to the profession of arms; and be thoroughly developed as a tactical leader, teacher, and field grade officer.

The Small Group Leader

The title is neither a misnomer nor falsely aspirational — as an SGL, you’ll be a leader. However, exercising leadership here is markedly different from your experience with U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) units. Your experience thus far has likely been the responsibility of a few key leaders who are in turn responsible for other junior leaders or small teams, but leadership as an SGL requires a fundamentally different approach. MCCC students are mature and educated rising professionals with prior leadership experience, not younger lieutenants still learning the basics of organization and doctrine. Your goal is no longer about directing your organization to a common goal, but to challenge self-motivated individuals to attain an individual level of expertise in a collective environment.

In practice, this is evinced as the Adult Learning Model, an understanding of group formation, and the art of practicing adaptive leadership — guiding the process of work as you set conditions for the students to reach the desired outcome on their own. Years ago, the term for an MCCC teacher changed from small group instructor to small group leader. The change was not accidental. It was made to reflect that the role is not simply delivering content to individuals but rather guiding the process of student learning, internalization, and teaching the students’ own future subordinate leaders. In this way, an SGL’s impact distills through current students to reach the lieutenants and NCOs they will command in the upcoming years. Students are actively preparing for their roles as “educators” in their future commands, and SGLs are developing that capacity at the career course. This has always been the approach of effective leadership and proves “if you’re not teaching, you’re not really leading.” As an SGL, you’ll get an exceptional opportunity to develop in this key competency.



Maneuver Captains Career Course students participate in a practical exercise to understand the individual concepts of each of the five paragraphs of an operation order. (Photo courtesy of 3rd Battalion, 81st Armor Regiment)

Your leadership competencies are further developed by an understanding that you are serving a collective seminar (small group), but the learning is distinctly individual. Though you will serve as an instructor for 16-20 students, your fundamental goal is to instill an understanding in each individual mind in the classroom. As a commander or small unit leader, you approached your three to five individual junior leaders to give focused-directed coaching and guidance. As an SGL, you'll have a one-on-one relationship with each individual student, not filtered through junior echelons of leaders. The SGL-to-student ratio violates an operational "span of control" but challenges you with responsibility for far more learning to a far greater number of students. Translating learning outcomes to 16-20 people cannot be approached in the same way as disseminating lessons to your unit, and this challenge personally develops your ability to lead and develop a large group unlike any of your previous experiences.

Serving a greater number of people with a higher level of competency and a greater volume of learning forces you to be deliberate. To be successful, you must maintain a disciplined focus on what you are there for before determining what you should do. This means bringing your allegiance to doctrine and the future success of your students into alignment, even when your students resist, and finding the right tools to pace the learning. This wisdom is infused into the culture at MCCC from initial to final counseling with the director of tactics. Moreover, you will receive personal coaching and feedback on your ability to lead the adaptive learning process from superiors and peers alike. The certification process for new SGLs is grueling and extremely developmental, but the culture of leadership learning continues to challenge and develop you throughout your time at MCCC.

Contributing to the Profession of Arms

While conquering a new level of leadership as an SGL, you will also be given a wealth of opportunities to contribute to the profession of arms. Most obviously, your role in the development of future company commanders will have an outsized impact across the Army. The SGL cohort is soberly mindful of the 1:20 and 20:120 ratio: One SGL will personally impact about 20 students in his or her seminar, who will then go on to impact the 120 Soldiers in their future commands. If you are reading this as a post-CCC officer, you likely recall your own SGL and the impact they made during your time in their seminar. Your own experience at the CCC shapes the way you approach command in your planning style, tactical competency, and leadership approach. If you care about investing in the next generation of company commanders, there is no better assignment than serving as an SGL. The opportunity to positively impact hundreds of companies, troops, and batteries is immense.

One of the first lessons of the career course is an exercise in how to think critically and creatively. Through doctrine, non-Department of Defense (DoD) reading, and exercises, SGLs attempt to illustrate that the point of CCC is not

to dictate what to think but to give students the tools for how to think. These tools appropriately rely heavily on doctrine in the application of planning methodologies and tactical decisions but are rooted in this initial discussion of thinking critically and creatively. Illustrations like the Dunning-Kruger effect and the Marshmallow Test teach students to challenge assumptions and reach fact-based conclusions while simultaneously engaging in creative and collaborative thinking. From day one, students are encouraged to challenge material even as it is being given to them. This process of challenging every piece of new information transforms learning from a passive “receive-mode” process to an active struggle that results in true internalization of the material. It results in rejecting bad ideas and introducing better solutions, which is a critical component of flexibility and adaptive organizational learning. SGLs practice what they preach. Teams of SGLs constantly review, critique, and propose changes to the MCCC through module working groups to ensure the course remains doctrinally correct, tactically sound, and properly accounts for the character of war in the 21st century.

MCCC offers other opportunities to contribute to the profession beyond the classroom. SGLs are commonly asked to review and provide input for doctrinal publications. Within the past six months, we have reviewed and provided feedback for revised drafts of Field Manual (FM) 3-90-1, *Offense and Defense*, and Army Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (ATTP) 3-06.11, *Combined Arms Operations in Urban Operations*. SGLs are also provided temporary duty (TDY) opportunities to Combat Training Centers (CTCs) and other professional military education (PME) to observe and provide feedback on how the Army teaches combined arms tactics more broadly, which then provides better insight for students and doctrine review. SGLs have an immense amount of autonomy in their classrooms — you will have the freedom to cater to your style and your students’ learning needs. However, SGLs also contribute to the actual program of instruction (POI) for the course. In the same way, students are encouraged to challenge and think creatively, SGLs constantly evaluate and critique the MCCC POI to determine if we are teaching the right things in the right way. At the time this article was written, we were working through a complete rewrite of how urban operations are taught to students in the career course.

Your First Student: You

This environment of constant analysis, evaluation, and creativity is not easy for the SGL — but it is exceptionally developmental. Serving as an SGL directly makes you a better maneuver officer and develops you in the execution of unified land operations. As the adage states, “If you want to master something, teach it.” Nothing challenges and develops you more as a maneuver officer than attempting to instruct a room of students you just taught to question everything. This is a positive experience — knowing you will be instructing doctrinal planning and tactics forces you toward a deeper study and appreciation of that doctrine. It is necessary for the sake of your instruction. It also produces a much deeper level of understanding and application in your own mind and models what you expect from your students.

However, this exceptional growth does not occur in a vacuum. Your SGL peers are top-rated individuals who will challenge and develop you. Each SGL team is composed of four Infantry officers, four Armor officers, one Field Artillery officer, one Aviation officer, and a team chief senior. The result is a highly competent, competitive, and experientially diverse team. Your small, combined arms cohort will greatly deepen your understanding and application of maneuver warfare. Everyone has a vested interest in the success of our future company commanders; therefore, everyone has a vested interest in your success.

It is doubtful SGLs are hired for their doctrinal mastery prior to arriving at the Maneuver Center of Excellence. Instead, the cohort of SGLs is made of people who simply care about the success of our students, care about the success of our Army, and have the humility and aptitude to learn. When these talented people form a group, it creates a great atmosphere where peers challenge each other to be the best in doctrine, tactics, and the exercise of leadership. Furthermore, your leaders offer you the clear guidance and latitude to truly develop a better course through each teaching iteration. We have been fortunate to have received some truly exceptional leaders during our time in the Army, but the leaders at MCoE made it the norm.

Lastly, your communication skills will improve. Faced with leading a class every day, you’ll become well practiced at communicating effectively and concisely while tailoring to your audience. You’ll realize in real time the difference between teaching an individual and teaching a group, and find a lot of fulfillment in watching your verbal messaging and example sink into your students’ minds. You’ll also improve your written communication skills. The paper you’ve been thinking of writing since you were a platoon leader will receive the challenge and support needed

to come to fruition. Not only are SGLs frequently published, but camaraderie matched with critical and creative thinking make this assignment the perfect place to experiment with new concepts in a safe environment. There is no shortage of people willing to listen and try out new ideas, perhaps even encouraging you to adapt and publish them. You will be in an environment of positive peer-to-peer challenges to learn and grow.

Conclusion

Serving as an SGL is a rewarding experience and should rank among your top choices for post-command broadening. You will experience a unique set of leadership challenges that will directly influence your ability to manage large teams as a field grade leader, and you'll practice and receive feedback on these skills in real time. Your impact on the lives of your students, their future Soldiers, and the tactics of our Army is also a clear and tangible way to contribute to the profession. Finally, you will grow immensely as a maneuver officer and be well prepared for your future education and assignment as a field grade officer. As you approach your upcoming marketplace, map your career timeline, or begin thinking about where you might go post-command, consider your service to the next generation of company commanders as a small group leader at the MCCC.

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CPT Chris Jarrett served as an SGL for 12 months and is currently an Art of War Scholar at CGSC. His former assignments include serving as a SBCT rifle platoon leader, battalion scout platoon leader, and assistant S3. He commanded the Dismounted Reconnaissance Troop and Headquarters Troop of 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division and earned a Masters of Public Administration from Harvard Kennedy School.