

Team Leader Certification Course

For the Light Infantry Company

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The team leader is arguably the most pivotal leader on the battlefield when it comes to the success of companies and platoons in combat. This is not meant to diminish the role of other combat leaders, but rather to highlight the need for strong leadership at the fire team level.

Field Manual (FM) 7-8, *The Infantry Platoon and Squad*, and the *Ranger Handbook* define the team leader as, “a fighting leader who leads by personal example.” Both references go on to outline the numerous tasks and duties to be performed by team leaders in a field environment. TC 22-6, *The Army Non-commissioned Officer Guide*, contains several pages of responsibilities expected of team leaders in the garrison. In the field (and combat) the team leader is to be the first leader a soldier looks to for an example of what is right and the first leader he sees react when the bullets start to fly. In garrison, the team leader not only sets the example, but he is also the grease on the axle that keeps the administrative wheels of the platoon rolling smoothly.

Team leaders are meant to be knowledgeable mentors to the soldiers as well. The soldiers of the team expect them to be able to answer their questions, or at least point them in the right direction to find answers. Soldiers expect their

team leader to be able to take care of them and their individual needs. Pay problems, board preparation, and personal problems are just a few areas where the team leader is the first leader a soldier goes to for guidance. Yes, the NCO support chain may ultimately be involved in the solution, but there is more than one platoon sergeant or squad leader out there who is thankful for an experienced team leader who can take care of most of the leg-work before bringing the issue to his level. A team leader who can take care of his soldiers earns the confidence of both his men and his supervisors.

There is another reason to recognize the importance of good team leaders. FM 100-5, *Operations*, points out that, “In the chaos of battle, it is essential to decentralize decision authority to the lowest practical level.” This statement underlines the need for strong leadership ability and initiative at the team leader level. It is not inconceivable for a team leader in a combat situation to become the squad leader or platoon sergeant (this happens frequently at the combat training centers). Team leaders need to be ready to step into these positions and have the personal confidence to execute in the absence of direction. The ability to understand and execute the mission two levels up is a corner-

stone of our leadership doctrine and is one of the reasons for placing priority on developing and training subordinate leaders.

The Reality

With the importance of the team leader’s role established, a fundamental problem remains. Many, if not most, team leader positions in rifle platoons are not manned by experienced corporals or sergeants, but by good specialists (or even privates first class). In some cases the “good” specialist might not really be that good, but just happened to be the next ranking soldier. He may lack the experience required to be immediately effective in their position, and the squad leader and platoon sergeant must pick up the slack in enforcing standards and accomplishing tasks. Because of their junior rank and inexperience they also have trouble maintaining a degree of separation from their peers, which hampers their ability to make on-the-spot corrections and enforce standards of discipline.

This inexperience, again, comes into play concerning field craft and responsibilities. Many times they are unaware of what is expected of them. Other leaders expect them to know their jobs and carry out their tasks as experienced team leaders, but what is expected is not

always what happens. For example, in a platoon hasty defense, the platoon leader does not have the time to position each and every weapon. He relies on his NCOs, namely the squad and team leaders, to establish sectors of fire within the boundaries given them for their squads and teams. Platoon leaders and platoon sergeants should make spot checks only to ensure the sectors are correct and offer full coverage. Finding sectors that are incorrect causes the platoon leader to make further checks and corrections, which detracts from his time to accomplish other critical tasks. In this environment, leaders may not have the time to show subordinate leaders how to accomplish a task correctly and to standard.

Training to the standard is a must for all leaders and units, but *teaching* the standard must be done first. These young team leaders cannot be blamed for their inability to enforce standards of training if they have never been taught what the standard is to begin with. This is one of the purposes of the Primary Leadership Development Course (PLDC)—to teach and instill a baseline for Army standards in future NCOs. Unfortunately, a number of team leaders have not attended PLDC and wait in line on the Order of Merit List. In the meantime, they must rely on the day-to-day activities in garrison and collective unit training in the field to gain whatever experience they can. Rarely do they become the focus for training. When NCO professional development sessions are planned, many team leaders are excluded because they are not yet NCOs, thus widening the gap in experience.

In short, a great deal is expected of team leaders, yet they lack the knowledge, tools and experience to do the job well. Colonel (Retired) Dandridge M. Malone formulated a simple equation for combat success in his book, *Small Unit Leadership: A Common Sense Approach*. Simply put, WILL x SKILL x DRILL = KILL. This formula applies at every level of individual and collective training. A team leader may have the will or desire to lead, but lacks the experience in skills and training (drill) to be successful. Team leaders need to

be given the opportunity to learn how to apply their will, increase their skill, and continually drill so they can become proficient and gain the experience they need to be effective. The start point for this equation is to place a high priority on team leader development to bridge leadership deficiencies. One possible solution is a simple, team leader certification course at the company level.

The Course

The scope of the course would involve prospective team leaders who have not yet attended PLDC. Platoon sergeants would recommend candidates to the company first sergeant who would review the potential team leader's packet to ensure his potential. The prospective team leader would be notified of his nomination and of the information he should begin studying in preparation for the course. Platoon sergeants and squad leaders are responsible

Battles are fought and won by Infantry squads. Place emphasis on small unit combat instruction so that it is conducted with the same precision as close-order drill.

General George S. Patton, Jr.

for helping prepare their candidates. Those soldiers who successfully complete the course receive a training certificate and documentation in their training records. Satisfactory completion of the course could serve as ranking criteria for order-of-merit lists to PLDC and other schools. Failure to complete the course would result in counseling and the first sergeant's determination as to the candidate's future as a team leader.

The recommended course format is broken down into two phases over five days, depending, of course, on what material a company deems necessary for their team leaders. The first phase is in a classroom environment covering various topics. This phase is immediately followed by a field phase that allows practical application of subjects covered in the classroom. Courses can be scheduled six weeks out, or in accor-

dance with the battalion's policy for submitting training schedules. Red Cycles (except for high-priority tasking weeks), or other periods of low training intensity make ideal times to schedule the course.

Once subject matter is determined, the platoon sergeants write the course outline with the first sergeant acting as the quality assurance control for the classes and their presentation. Course material is carefully reviewed, and clear tasks, conditions, and standards are established. Platoon sergeants then act as primary instructors, where appropriate. Senior squad leaders also act as instructors or as graders on training lanes in the field. Minimum course size is nine soldiers, with a maximum of eighteen. This number is manageable and keeps the strain on the company to a minimum.

Candidates are required to pass the Army Physical Fitness Test on the day before the course begins, with platoon sergeants and squad leaders scoring the events. Candidates are also required to pass the height and weight standards or tape test as applicable. During the course, candidates administer PT to their platoons or squads. Squad leaders grade the candidates on their ability to conduct a proper PT session. Following the session, the candidates receive written and oral performance counseling, which is included in their packets.

Military knowledge is also important, as team leaders need to display their competence to team members. Candidates are administered a comprehensive written exam covering a wide area of military subjects, including unit policy letters, knowledge of FMs and Army Regulations, unit history, and unit standing operating procedures. Other areas can be added to this as well, depending on what knowledge is considered essential for team leaders. An even better idea is to conduct a board for team leaders before enrollment in the course, which prepares them for future promotion boards. Preparation on the part of the team leader and his support channel, well in advance of the course, is essential to his success in this area.

In the two and a half days of class-



squad size situational training exercise (STX) lanes. Candidates are given a fragmentary order to an earlier operations order, and are then given 90 minutes to conduct TLPs, move to the objective, and conduct the mission. Candidates are critiqued on how well they influenced their squad members to perform vari-

ous missions and battle drills. In conjunction with the STX lanes, team leaders are also given classes on patrolling techniques and squad patrol bases, and are required to pass a day and night land navigation course.

room work, team leaders are exposed to a wide array of subjects essential to their success. Each of these subjects is covered in a block of instruction, which is followed by either a practical exercise, performance measure, or written exam to ensure the team leader's understanding of the material. The course covers several areas, including counseling. Here the team leader is taught the importance and purposes of counseling as well as the standard for counseling. Maintenance is covered as the team leader learns how to conduct and supervise maintenance procedures, along with using technical manuals and filling out paperwork correctly.

Upon return, the students conduct maintenance on equipment to reinforce the recovery standards covered in the earlier classroom portion. Before their release, candidates are required to complete a class critique and turn it in for review by the first sergeant. Instructors and graders are also required to turn in a critique with recommended improvements. Changes based on these recommendations are made at the discretion of the first sergeant.

The Advantages

Developing and implementing a team leader training program at the company level holds several key advantages.

The first is that companies can easily manage the team leader course. With more than a few experienced NCOs in the unit, responsibilities can be divided over a wide base of personnel. It is important, however, that key personnel be designated at least six months ahead in order to avoid last-minute preparation and frustration. Instructors and graders should also be rotated so that the workload is equally distributed.

A second advantage is that the course does not have to be resource intensive. Logistical needs can be kept at a minimum without sacrificing training standards. Again, it is important to forecast supply requests well in advance of the course and to protect resources from other training events. But it is also important not to let the course become a drain on a unit and its mission essential

tasks. If the course does overtax the unit's resources and personnel, it is not likely to be continued for long.

Standardization of information in the company is another benefit of the course. With the senior NCOs developing the course material and teaching it to the junior NCOs, the company leaders are literally reading off the same page. Unit SOPs and policies are understood and enforced to higher standard. Administrative procedures are carried out more efficiently because team leaders require less supervision, and soldiers are hearing the same information from the all NCO leadership in the company.

Finally, the biggest payoff of the course is that it gives junior team leaders the confidence they need to do their jobs well. Knowledge truly is power for leaders and with this power, team leaders can project themselves with more confidence in front of superiors and subordinates. Knowledge also gives team leaders the fuel they need to exercise higher levels of initiative in work performance. Team leaders are now able to recognize situations and execute tasks faster and with less supervision. The confidence and satisfaction gained by team leaders in doing a job to a higher standard can also improve the chances of retaining these soldiers when their enlistments are up.

S. L. A. Marshall wrote that platoons determine the fate of armies. He and General Patton both knew from history and experience that success on the battlefield is not determined by great tactics or the best equipment (although both help), but by competent leadership at the small-unit level. Our team leaders are the first link in small-unit leadership, and they need the tools to perform their duties to the highest degree. If team leaders determine the fate of armies, then fire teams determine the fate of companies and battalions.

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