

SMALL UNIT LEADER DEVELOPMENT

Relevant to the COE and the Future

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“As a small unit leader, you should only be doing two things: Leading Soldiers and small units during battle...Preparing Soldiers and small units to fight the battle.”

— Colonel Dandridge “Mike” Malone

If you have been in the Army more than a year or two, I’m sure you have been inundated with what the keys to success are to best prepare your team to go back into theater. I’m sure it has included a lengthy checklist of tasks at various levels that you must “get to” during a very crowded and abbreviated Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) cycle. However, after over 20 years of service, including leading a small squad-sized tactical command post (TAC) over hundreds of miles during Desert Shield and Storm, commanding a rifle company in combat in Somalia and an Long Range Surveillance Detachment in Haiti, and most recently





a reconnaissance squadron in Iraq in southwest Baghdad for the last 15 months, my priority has not changed. **Your most important task is development of your small unit leaders.** It will be their ability to call the audible in football quarterback fashion across five lines of operations confidently, timely, and for the most part accurately that will determine your unit's success.

A primary focus on small unit leaders and the small teams they lead remains paramount to all other priorities in a brief ARFORGEN refit. These leaders' technical proficiency remains half of the equation but not the most important part. It simply is the art of solid decision making, the art piece, which will make or break the success of a small team. Can this sergeant to lieutenant leader make repetitive quality decisions by calling the audible to adapt to situations that may not fit a template he received in his early leadership training? Of course they have to, and they generally have already been doing so. However, with the stakes in Iraq as high as they have been as we enter our fifth year of war, this select group of individuals will remain the essential piece in determining if the improvements we have achieved in the last year become lasting. It will require these leaders to operate with the wisdom normally expected of a much senior leader. And it is essential that battalion-level leadership concentrate extensively on this endeavor.

To support this thesis, I turn to the recently published FM 3-0. Chapter 4, *Elements of Combat Power*, posits that "leadership is the multiplying and unifying element of combat power." "Effective leadership can compensate for deficiencies in all the warfighting functions because it is the most dynamic element of combat power." "Effective leadership must display character, presence and intellect." This is leadership at all levels and is probably most important at the lowest level. If the strategy is not quite right, these guys at the lowest level and their ability to figure it out will always save the day. This ability to figure it out first resonated with me when I heard General H. Norman Schwarzkopf describe after Desert Storm that we could have won with **their** equipment because of our leadership. His remark clearly indicates where he ranked the importance of leadership. Therefore, despite a busy and short ARFORGEN cycle the battalion commander must keep small unit leader development at the top of the priority list.



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With the stakes in Iraq as high as ever, small unit leaders are an essential piece in determining if the improvements achieved there in the last year become lasting.

How to Build This Small Unit Leader

Unless your small unit leader is a complete anomaly, he will come to you with the basics and may be slightly advanced based on the examples he had from his commissioning source. To adequately prepare most of your leaders for the graduate level of war you will have to provide them repetition. There is no secret, no 15 minutes a day to lose pounds, no shortcut, no go to sleep and have the education and experience melded into this young leader's mind to allow him to act with true wisdom. It is simply the old-fashioned way — repetition presented under varying conditions.

Today much of our institutional knowledge is infused into our NCOs by on-the-job training (OJT), passed to them by the excellent example of a senior NCO or officer, or picked up through self study. In the contemporary operational environment (COE), this simply is inadequate to allow him to operate at the graduate level of warfare required of him. His first stab at institutional knowledge will come at the Warrior Leader Course, the Basic NCO Course (re-designated the Advanced Leaders Course in FY09), or the Maneuver Advanced NCO Course, (re-designated the Maneuver Senior Leader Course in FY09). If he has learned his lessons well, is near the top of his class and has a rotation or

two to theater under his belt, he has gained invaluable experience; however, he is still incomplete, as he probably has not had time to refine his thoughts, think academically about what he has experienced and get closer to true wisdom before it is time to jump into the next round. He tends to quickly become inundated with a philosophy of improvise — adapt — overcome. He may have even had a chance to partially exploit his efforts academically through some self study, but he remains with only half to two-thirds of the wisdom equation: lots of experience but still lacking the time to think about what he has experienced.

For our young officer his preparation is normally the exact opposite of his NCOs', unless he is a prior service enlisted Soldier. He has been imbued with many theories of leadership and maybe had some of the same good examples that the young NCO had but nevertheless lacks the experience. In theory, it would seem to balance out just like years of old, experience on the enlisted side versus academic credentials on the officer side combined to produce wisdom of action. The problem is that we are requiring this wisdom of both sets of our junior leaders, NCO and officer. So the question remains, how do we address this?

In our unit I first seized on concepts that the entire team was familiar with — the Army Values and the Soldier's Creed. I used these as the bricks and mortar to bind these two

sets of leaders together. We would combine experience with academic knowledge to really produce wisdom. It was not enough for our leaders to be able to *recite* these words: they had to be true believers and *live* them. Once we achieved this we provided additional guidance to give them a common purpose by adding our own five core values to the Army Values.

From the Army Values and our unit core values, I added repetition of a simple arithmetic formula I picked up a long time ago, again inspired by Colonel Malone: SKILL x DRILL x WILL (the most important piece) = the KILL. Since getting the KILL was not always our objective, especially going to a counterinsurgency (COIN), I replaced it with EFFECTIVENESS. So, to the Army Values, we added our five core values. The first was marksmanship and realistic maneuver live fires, the second physical training, the third mental and physical toughness, the fourth personal and technical education, and lastly reconnaissance skills. The command sergeant major (CSM) also kept a top 10 list of important individual tasks that were periodically rotated to ensure we remained skillful at our base level tasks. **Nothing revolutionary perhaps, but values that we actually lived and — most importantly — practiced every day.** It became repetitious, but not boring as in something that was simply recited. We said it in formation; we said it at awards ceremonies; or we said it at the completion of a 25-mile road march when we were near physical exhaustion. And I must admit it became sort of religious, but it resulted in a collective power that only hard training and shared discomfort could produce. Slowly the two sets of leaders were being melded together, sharing their strengths with each other and preparing themselves for the incredible leadership challenges that would require their collective and individual wisdom upon deployment.

Repetition and constant exposure to our themes were the simple elements in building an unmatched chemistry within the squadron. We did more Leader Professional Development exercises instead of just Officer Professional Development drills, including many sergeants and above in these events to point out that the leadership team absolutely had to work together to produce the wisdom I was after. We still did things to build strength and maintain spirit within the officer and NCO corps that were normally run by me or my CSM personally. The Soldiers had to see me and the CSM practicing what we preached, and our leaders quickly understood the kind of effort we required. Leaders that arrived at the unit who did not understand what we were trying to do either raised their standards, fell by the wayside or were put into positions not requiring constant leadership expertise. Our theme of SKILL x DRILL x WILL allowed us to move to higher levels with our leadership.

This spawned self-development in our young leaders as they hungrily grabbed at more material on their own, reinforcing the initiative I demanded from them, further reinforced by the prime leadership examples set by the squadron. These two things (self study, quality role models) combined with planned small unit leader professional development classes gave us the repetitions in DRILL style, to provide our small unit leaders with more SKILL. When we trained, each leader was given multiple opportunities and exposure to different scenarios and multiple runs to allow him to add to his

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trick bag and develop his own graduate-level playbook. **Not rigid, but one that he could use for reference to audible off in the future.** More repetitions gave him more confidence and fed the hunger for more. By creating this type of learning environment, our leaders truly became comfortable working with the initiative. Joined at the hip with both NCO and officer leadership, it produced small unit leadership crafty enough to “call the audible” in good quarterback style if things did not quite fit the playbook, much like the environment they were to experience in

Iraq.

As a squadron commander my way to keep this going was simple: reinforce my themes every chance I got. My main disciples were, of course, the CSM, executive officer (XO) and S3 triumvirate. We took this message to the troop commanders and first sergeants and it spread. I would personally reinforce this every chance I got, at PT, observing training, meetings or what ever. The Soldiers needed to see me doing it, they had to hear me saying it, they needed to read it in writing through e-mail and get the same message from my other senior leaders no matter what position they held in the squadron. Eventually this attitude permeated down and across to each and every Soldier in the squadron.

I demanded that each task, no matter how small, be executed with initiative and discipline. While the lessons were cheap, I allowed for initiative to rule so these leaders could better learn from their mistakes. They also realized that discipline did not necessarily mean everyone had to get it done the same way or hang their kit off their rack the same way. The ultimate goal was for the job to get done and for Soldiers to think about how they were organizing their kit, truck or other weapons system to be most effective for the mission. If they did use their heads and could explain it, for me that was an indicator that we were moving closer to my desired end state of wisdom. Naturally, most of my questioning revolved around seeing if my leaders were thinking.

Further products of this approach also spread as loyalty, confidence and trust were increased one Soldier, one small unit leader, one small team at a time. Now we were getting somewhere. Or, as spelled out by an anonymous source in the *Infantry Journal* of 1948, our collective appointments as small unit leaders were clearly being ratified in the hearts and minds of the men. With collective chemistry, mature confident leaders with an iron WILL were able to not just survive a 15-month deployment but also excelled at their missions. Our leaders and Soldiers were passionate about our team and you could see it in everything they did. Passionate, disciplined and operating with complete initiative.

Building Chemistry and How to Measure It

The base for the creation of this more capable small unit leader, who was comfortable calling the audible and getting it right 9 of 10 times, was nearly complete. But the hard part was to figure out how to measure its continuance. Again taking from FM 3-0, I used measures of performance (MOP) and measures of effectiveness (MOE). Were my leaders doing the job within the wide margin of commanders intent that I had given them and most importantly were we effectively getting the job done? Unlike the laborious staff task of measuring success over large periods of time over five

difficult lines of operation, measuring if your leaders and small teams have good chemistry and were operating collectively with wisdom is really quite simple.

The garrison and training environment gave multiple planned and unplanned opportunities to measure this. The first of these measures could be measured at PT. I personally required my leaders to plan detailed PT plans to not just improve PT scores but to make us more physically able in combat. In this case the execution of these tasks and the innovation I viewed told me we were getting it. Although a gym is nice and you can repetitively target muscles used on patrol, simple rocks, ropes, vehicles, steps, various parts of your kit and various other “torture devices” could all be combined with a wonderful natural environment full of woods and streams to target all those muscles that needed improvement. My leaders never let me down, increasing their collective imaginations with more innovative ways to change the conditions, repeat it and still get the mission accomplished. This was precisely the kind of innovative thought I needed.

Our leaders explained this was not punishment but the hard work needed to improve the team, and of course, they had to lead it. Too many times we see talk about leading by example, but it truly has to be taken to heart by all leaders and it started with the CSM and with me. On my travels I

viewed other indicators of getting it right as sergeants and lieutenants repetitively explained the tasks, conditions, and standards and actually spent the additional time with the Soldiers who did not get it at first. This takes incredible patience, perseverance, and persistence for your small unit leader as he wants to get out and run with the studs, but spending the time on less physically fit Soldiers is a sign of maturity. They also spent time talking about other conditions and encouraged their Soldiers to talk about yet more scenarios they could face, and talk out what they would do. Yet another indicator of success in our endeavor was leaders acknowledging that not all the Soldiers came to them as “A” students and they would have to in some cases tailor their approach to get the most out of their team. And finally the small unit leader used his A students to improve his C and D students to take their game just one — and in some cases two — levels higher. When you see this happening during PT, after hours or even on the weekends, you know your team is going the right way.

Now, many of the measures of effectiveness could be missed if you’re not looking for them. So, just like a good scout has to be able to pick up on human traits or nonverbal signals, you have to train yourself to look for them. For instance, using my PT analogy again, how did we conduct fall out operations on a run? Before we

progressed, the first stages normally involved choice four-letter words to supposedly provide encouragement to the malefactor who had fallen out. Ultimately, this might make the guys still in formation feel good, but it really did not have a positive effect on the fall out. The effectiveness meter is going in the right direction if the squad or section goes back to get the guy, carrying him if need be, until eventually the fall out feels enough dedication to do the extra work needed to stay with the team. In fact, nothing will stop him from improving himself. This fall out may never be an A student, but again your leaders have created an environment where this fall out has at least moved one step higher than he thought possible and will add to the effectiveness of the team. Strive to have bigger ears and a smaller mouth and you might be tuned on to how one Soldier at a time, specifically the D student, is being integrated into the team. Now the hard part for you at battalion level is how to figure out to give the A student more repetitions to improve him as well.

Another indicator is one you may not consider on first glance, but which is just as important, and that is socialization. Do you have Soldiers going downtown alone or are they going in Ranger buddy or fire teams? Do they collectively check each other from getting into trouble or take care of rehabilitating a Soldier back to the team if he has gotten into trouble? When you have a squadron formal, do you have to create an advertising campaign to get the team to go or is the team clamoring to go and in fact go in droves, because they are damned proud to be on your team? These are all indicators. Perhaps another more quantifiable measure is simply the reenlistment rate. Again, ask your Soldiers why they are reenlisting, specifically your first termers. They will tell you that their first Army team is great, it has changed their lives, and despite the hardship they will do it again. These are simply wonderful sounds to the ear. In the squadron our team achieved 300 percent of our prescribed reenlistment mission for our first termers, best in both the 10th and 3rd Infantry divisions of which we were a part. Naturally, we were getting it.

Other training events can also be used as indicators. Again just look a little harder at taking measurements. We spend a lot of time quantifying our readiness. Leave this to your staff because statistics are



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The reenlistment rate specifically among first termers can be a quantifiable indicator of small unit leaders’ performance and effectiveness.



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Battle Command and Point of the Spear leadership

“The commander’s will is the one constant element that propels the force through the shock and friction of battle. Soldiers may approach that point when fear, uncertainty, and physical exhaustion dominate their thinking. It is then that the commander’s strength of will and personal presence provides the moral impetus for actions that lead to victory.”

— FM 3-0, Operations

Let us assume that the leaders and small teams are built right and many of your small unit leaders are now operating with the wisdom of a much more senior leader. Now your unit is deployed and you have to keep it going. Now you must translate your broad commander’s guidance from training to the actual combat zone and allow your leaders to exercise their own piece of battle command. At the center of this challenge I never deviated from my understanding that personal WILL or their state of mind and team chemistry is what I had to monitor. According to Ardant du Picq’s *Roots of Strategy, Book 2* in “Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern Battle,” battle is the final objective of armies and man is the fundamental instrument in battle. Nothing can be wisely prescribed in an Army — its personnel, organization, discipline and tactics, things which are connected like the fingers of a hand — without exact knowledge of the fundamental instrument, man and his state of mind, his morale, at the instant of combat.

My leaders’ WILL remained the critical element of combat leadership. Fifteen months of continual stress doing various diverse tasks along five lines of operation is quite a test. Keeping the small unit leader calling quality tactical audibles and keeping himself and his team functioning with the same high levels of discipline and initiative as when it entered country is the challenge. The demands of daily patrolling, deaths, injuries and various other factors — expected and unexpected — naturally will work to break the WILL of your small unit leader, and he must recognize this.

As a battalion commander I spent a lot of time being seen, still gauging performance and effectiveness and not to nitpick, but to ensure I had the best platoon leadership package on the street every day. To effectively do this I spent a lot of time outside the wire not just talking to the locals but to my platoons. Only in this way could I really understand their problems and see how it was affecting their performance. I explained why I was out in the field so often and why it was so important to keep the best team out on the street. Most of them understood and in fact felt comfortable with and appreciated my presence. It still remains an art, but my presence was what they grew up with in training and what I gave them in combat. Consistency of action and spending most of my time talking to my leaders, at night, in the motor pool, at patrol bases, in CPs or where ever. Mix this with the art of seeing but not being seen and you have a good indication of how the team and their leaders are doing. In most cases, level of performance is most evident after taking a punch — after Soldiers are injured or killed — and seeing how you and your small team leaders provide the WILL to get back up and get after it. This is probably the most critical indicator of all.

One of our experiences happened the night after the squadron had three Soldiers killed in an IED attack. That same night a different platoon in a different troop not far from the site where the Soldiers were killed identified three IED emplacers on the spot. They engaged and killed two of them and wounded and detained a third. As the enemy dead lay there the platoon sergeant simply said, “That one

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important: more experts on the range, better effect with your mortars, et cetera... But you need to measure what is only quantifiable by viewing human action. In this case I used how we were conducting our ranges. God forbid if the first one you view is being run like the first one I experienced as a basic trainee in 1982, where I was positively controlled through each movement. If it is being run in this controlling fashion, then change it. You are going to expect your leaders to make big boy decisions, so repetitively implement big boy rules on the ranges. I expect initiative and discipline, so give them the chance to practice the repetitions on the range. The onus for safety is on the small unit leader of each team who has explained the purpose of the Soldier drawing and loading his own ammo, keeping his safety on until ready to engage, and keeping the muzzle in a safe direction on his own accord. The tower does not need to do this. I mean, heck, we train kids to hunt safely at the age of 10 or less, so why not with our Soldiers who we are going to expect a lot more out of?

As we progress our leader explains why we are spending so much time on various ranges and repetitively changing conditions. And then he moves to the science of accuracy, and talks short range and long range marksmanship, engagement of partially exposed and moving targets with various systems both day and night from various positions in buildings or in the field. Just one trip to the range will tell you if this is working. And when you get back to the rear is the team still talking about how they are going to do more of it? Are they talking about hunting, weapons, paint balling, or are they going downtown by themselves because they don’t really think they are part of the team?

But it could be even more simple than that. How does the small team take care of its own? It’s raining and two members are out on an LP and their rucks are not covered. What happens? Does the team take care of them by covering their rucks? Or if they miss chow, does the team take care of them? Again, small indicators, but ones you need to look for to see if your small unit leaders and the small teams they lead are getting it.

was for Bravo.” Yep, we were still doing all right.

As the platoon that was hit was put back together, they professionally and meticulously started building the relationships needed to establish an informant network instead of blindly swinging in large roundups to assuage our collective pain of troopers lost. No “cowboy up” occurred, just back to discipline and initiative. Each trooper was instructed and helped along by leaders and mental health professionals to develop his own coping mechanism to deal with the range of emotions from rage to sorrow, so when they were on a mission again they were mission focused. As I watched our leaders, I realized we were still doing OK. But I could not have detailed this unless I was out there. FM 3-0 notes that the commander’s forward presence demonstrates a willingness to share danger. It also allows an assessment of subordinate unit performance, including leader and Soldier morale.

These were tough times, yet the team was built of flexible brick. Flexible enough to remain focused on our main objectives of building our informant network, training and working with our Iraqi Army compatriots to selectively kill or detain insurgents to provide the security and control needed to make gains in the other lines of operation. Watching this team take a punch to the face like a Soldier’s death and move on to these other things is really the most incredible thing I experienced and have experienced in all my deployments. However, there were times that physical exhaustion and stress were accumulating enough that required you to take action.

To maintain the best platoon leadership package on the street remained the challenge. Everyone has a tipping point and some small units leaders may have started to lose the edge, were injured or on leave, or perhaps had to testify against someone you had detained. Within the squadron our pool of additional small unit leaders was small, and we generally received a trickle of new leadership throughout the rotation. But I maintained a small level of flexibility that allowed me to tweak the platoon leadership packages. My focus was on the platoon leaders generally, and the CSM was equally meticulous on the NCO leadership which we generally had less flexibility on. However, by our relentless measurement we made quality,

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precise leadership changes when needed.

With the platoon leaders, the first place I looked for new leadership was at the company XOs. In most cases they had already been successful platoon leaders and generally because of the earlier inculcation and focus of our expanded leadership training efforts were hungry to return to a platoon. Newly arrived lieutenants were carefully assessed on their ability to quickly step into a platoon without the benefit of the earlier training and lead it successfully. NCO leadership positions were generally taken out of the staff, but the officer/NCO team in a platoon was carefully evaluated to get the right team chemistry.

Redeployment and Getting Back into the Training Cycle

Careful management of your NCOs by your CSM and the officers by yourself will accurately project what will be left of the team for the new leadership upon redeployment. This data is invaluable and allows the incoming leadership to prepare to fill major holes in the battle roster. Most leaders look at this time as one of turmoil and tribulation; however, I looked at it as the time to clearly identify who was ready to step up. For a unit such as ours that was totally created from scratch, this just seemed like a natural change to take advantage of again getting the repetitions in for your emerging young leaders. Your young privates and specialists of the first go-around are now your leaders for round two. It is a great opportunity for them to get the repetitions they will need to provide the temporary leadership needed as the team transitions. With your ample help and liberal commander’s intent, you will allow them to build and learn the lessons again while the lessons are largely on the cheap in comparison with the higher stakes when lives are on the line.

The only thing you as a battalion commander have to provide is an open and unvarnished environment of communications, showing a personal passion in the work at hand, the events to give them the repetitions and the overhead to underwrite the mistakes that they will invariably make. As an investor, this remains a cost well spent that will pay the dividends you need a year down the road when that same small unit leader is making mature, sound, accurate and timely decisions, and calling audibles as needed to fit the situation.

In summary, your focus as a battalion commander preparing to take your outfit back to war is simple. Concentrate on training your small unit leaders and preparing them for the graduate level of learning and wisdom required of them while deployed. It will remain their WILL and ability to exercise battle command as a professional as the ultimate weapon, not the myriad of other things put on the ARFORGEN chart that supposedly are more important. Repetitions every day and getting the most out of the days’ daily tasks are how you will achieve this expert ability in your junior leaders. You and your disciples — the CSM, the XO, S3 and company commanders — must measure and gauge the progress of this most important task, reinforce your measures of performance if they are not being met, and recommend changes to direct one Soldier, one leader at a time. During battle you must be seen, yet practice the art of seeing without being seen. When the chips are down, it remains your own WILL and physical presence as the difference maker, and it is not found from a TOC behind a computer screen. As your team conquers the deployment, look again at your small unit leadership and identify what the team will look like for the new battalion-level leadership. And finally set the conditions that allow the new emerging leadership to immediately start the process all over again by giving them the repetitions, encouragement, and personal involvement that will stay the team for success in round two.

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