Changing units: Gaining Knowledge and Experience

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Abstract

**“A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.” John C. Maxwell**

No matter what your rank is, you must put time and effort into collecting as much knowledge and experience as you possibly can. As an NCO, this can equate to process enhancement, time and money saving, and most importantly lives saved. NCOs must be prepared to arrive at a new element and immediately run their section effectively. By writing about my experiences, I seek to give NCOs an insight on the importance of being well-rounded in order to be effective in any unit, at any level.

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Over a span of 20 years in service, I have been on Active Duty, in the Puerto Rico National Guard, and now I serve in the Army Reserve. Across every component, it was clear that the most effective NCOs were the ones that were rounded in both tactical and technical competencies. These NCOs were engaged at all times, teaching and leading their Soldiers through with experience and expertise.

I entered the Army Reserve in 2006 as a young Sergeant. My break in service from Active Duty was behind me, and I was at the point where I really wanted to excel in my new career as a finance specialist (I was previously in the Artillery). I hit the ground running my first year and went to both phases of MOS reclassification, BNCOC phases 1, 2, and 3, and an annual training event. In that period, I was asking NCOs what the secrets were to becoming successful, getting buy in from your Soldiers, and getting promoted.

The majority of the NCOs I spoke to gave me the following advice: do not become stagnant in a unit, and work in as many different sections as possible to round my financial management knowledge. This included moving units if I did not find the jobs I needed to do in order to progress and promote. This would not only help me in knowledge acquired, but by learning all these different aspects of my job, it also made me a rounded professional in my career field.

In your career as an NCO, you will encounter some Soldiers who are not motivated because they are not being taught or mentored. That is a problem in the Army Reserve because we only have minimal time throughout the year to engage our Soldiers. NCOs can fix this problem by engaging Soldiers throughout the month. I take interest in them, and I teach them as much as I can. That changes the dynamic in the section! I share experiences while I teach them, and show them a different path. This in turn gave my Soldiers a different view and attitude towards me. Because I do not stay in a unit long term, it gives me the ability to reach and mentor a lot of Soldiers and NCOs.

On Active Duty, you get moved around all the time, and hopefully you get to do new jobs in your field. In the Army Reserve, you could be in a unit for a long time. I have known people who have been in the same unit until retirement, in the same section, doing the same job. In my opinion, it is not a good way to do business. We must change environments to collect experience, and when we collect experience, we grow as NCOs.

Below is a snapshot of my assignments in Finance. Some of these assignments ran concurrently with ADOS orders in the Defense Finance and Accounting Service in Indianapolis, Indiana.

* 785th MP BN, Fraser, MI – S-1 Finance NCO, 2 years
* 327th MP BN, Arlington Heights, IL – Financial Manager/Detainee Finance (Iraq), 3 ½ years
* Defense Finance and Accounting Service, Indianapolis, IN – Tax Team NCOIC/DIHMERS data cleansing, 2 ½ years
* 376 FMSD, Whitehall, OH – Disbursing Manager/Disbursing Agent (Iraq), 2 years
* 336th FMSC, Lake Charles, LA – Internal Control Inspector (Kuwait/Afghanistan), 2 years
* Defense Finance and Accounting Service, Indianapolis, IN – MilPay NCOIC/CCA FM Certification, 2 years
* 100 RGT 5 BN 94th DIV, Harvey, IL – Senior Instructor Writer (Finance), 1 year
* 102nd TNG DIV, Fort Leonard Wood, MO – G-8, 1 year
* 326th FMSC, Los Angeles, CA – Senior Financial Management Advisor/Interim SGM (Qatar/Egypt), current since 2017

While assigned to the 326th FMSC, the unit mobilized. I was sitting in the E-9 slot as an E-8. We were the highest Financial Management unit in country. The FMSU below me had a SGM, which made for an initial shock for him, since his higher element did not have a SGM. It was easy for me to establish a baseline because I had all this experience and knowledge in Finance, and he understood that I was there to enhance the team, not to bicker about positions. It was a challenge to deal with Sergeants Major across the AOR, but once they saw the experience and knowledge, and how this translated into helping their units, they were at ease. We could work together to ensure mission success was accomplished.

**CONCLUSION**

Stagnancy is your enemy! Knowledge and experience come with a cost. You must get out of your comfort zone. Find a different unit that has a job in your specialty that you have not done before. Build the knowledge and experience in your career field. Your Soldiers will be more at ease and easier to manage because they know they have a leader who cares, and who will train them. Build a network; go to every school you can. Never be afraid to do something new. “Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t – you’re right” (Henry Ford).