Learning Leadership: Trusting your Training

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Abstract

Perhaps the most difficult skill for a NCO to develop is leadership. When one enters the NCO Corps, it is with the understanding that they have a certain amount of technical skill and tactical knowledge which can then be trained to subordinates. However, catch phrases such as knowledge, skills, and attributes do little to combat the inability of young NCO’s to actually lead. This paper seeks to identify the gap in leadership and provide a framework for effective development with practical implementation, and quantifiable results.

Keywords: leadership, trust, training

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# Background

“**At the end of the day, though, all a soldier learns about leading and following is learned from another soldier – a noncommissioned officer”** (Pendry).

This simple statement is the foundation for any type of leadership found in the Army. It does not matter the formation (combat arms, combat support, combat service support) that the soldier is in, nor the military occupational specialty held, it is the example shown by noncommissioned officers which develops the future of the NCO Corps. While the military finds itself in a constant cycle of training, deployment, redeployment, etc. it becomes obvious that this simple truth has been lost. So then, how does the NCO Corps reclaim its rightful inheritance as the foremost trainers and developers of leaders? Rather than reinventing the wheel, it is a matter of understanding what leadership is, how to effectively demonstrate it and then trust that the training you have given will be utilized correctly. From my own experience, it was as a Battle Staff NCO that this lesson was made manifest. While training soldiers was what I did daily as an NCO, it was when given responsibility by my Operations NCO that I objectively saw the need for me to improve my training and leadership habits. During a training exercise at NTC, I was given the opportunity to run the current operations so that the officers on staff could plan future operations. During a typical, the observer controllers executed a scenario and it was then that I realized that I had not prepared my soldiers well enough because as a leader, I did not trust that they would do the right things. After that debacle, I reevaluated how I was leading my soldiers, and what steps I needed to take to ensure that they developed as leaders. This required me to manage the operations rather than do everything. It was an epiphany for me, as the soldiers took ownership of their respective areas, and began to handle the scenarios as they developed. It was by trusting my training, trusting their abilities to execute the training, and modeling leadership which improved not only our operational capacity, but the leadership capacity of those young soldiers.

## Trusting your Training

Anecdotally, any number of noncommissioned officers could tell stories of rotations to training centers and the comedy of errors which seems to go along with any visit to the Louisiana swamp or California desert. From the simple task of establishing communications with surrounding units and higher headquarters to the complexity of a joint task force executing multiple targets at once, noncommissioned officers are keenly aware of the necessity of training, and the pitfalls created with any shortcomings. However, with a focus on compliance, these gaps may not be identified or overcome. Effectively, the efficacy of training has been reduced to a slide briefed to a commander once a quarter. For NCOs, read that sentence again. Your job, by definition, has been reduced to a power point slide. For Senior NCOs, who receive these briefings, how is this able to continue? How can leadership be developed when the tasks trained, which in fact develop leadership, are not viewed and/or treated with the necessary gravitas they deserve? This cycle leads to ineffective leadership at best, and combat loss at worst.

Due to this environment, there is very little time for noncommissioned officers to perform an internal assessment of their training style, let alone develop an awareness that their example is actually how their soldiers learn how to lead. So, we must start at the beginning and identify how training becomes the lens by which a leader can assess themselves. This is not reflected in a go/no-go, green/amber/red report. Rather, it is reflected in the audacity of soldiers to take charge when given charge, knowing that the leader who trained them **trusts** the training and the soldier to follow the leadership example.

### Trusting your Soldiers

If we are honest, most soldiers want competent leaders. This basic truth is repeated by all noncommissioned officers when they recite the NCO Creed. “All Soldiers are entitled to outstanding leadership; I will provide that leadership” (NCO Creed, n.d.). In fact, most people want those who are in senior positions to be competent in their jobs. This is true in the military and civilian worlds. The problem is that trusting your Soldiers inherently means that you trust your ability as a leader to have shown them the right way to execute a task. While NCO’s “strive to remain tactically and technically proficient” (NCO Creed, n.d.), how can an NCO train that same level of competence? Using the example of an NTC rotation, how often are soldiers, who should be executing a skill level 1 task with proficiency, standing to the side so the junior leader (in this case, an E-5 or E-4(p)) can do it “the right way”? From establishing communications, sending SITREPs and SPOT Reports (113-COM-4079-4080) to Searching an Individual in a Tactical Environment (159-COM-2026), NCOs must empower themselves to ensure that their soldiers are proficient in basic tasks (Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks Warrior Skills Level 1, 2015). This is the crux of the issue. Leadership means that an NCO not only trusts themselves to train their subordinates to standard, but also trust their Soldiers to execute the task to the same standard. Utilizing this basic idea, young leaders begin to develop their own leadership style when their NCOs demonstrate “what right looks like” as opposed to “doing it the right way” and not allowing their soldiers to learn.

#### Trusting yourself as a Leader

In a zero defect organization, leaders do not lead. In all honestly, leaders don’t even manage in that environment. Rather, each individual looks out for his or her own best interest, with a keen desire to not “rock the boat”. Again, anecdotally there is ample evidence that a zero defect mindset ensures a lack of leadership development. FM 6-22 states the challenge for leader development as “The Army must develop leaders comfortable making decisions with available information and prepared to underwrite the honest mistakes subordinates make when learning.” (FM 6-22 Leader Development, 2015, pp. 1-2). This is easily identified from the culture of the organization. From two-hour safety briefings to soldiers waiting to be released at the end of the day because something might come up, leadership is fundamentally lacking in those formations. Again, anecdotally this well-worn trope speaks a certain level of truth. The 2015 CASAL Military Leader Findings finds that over time “Leading Others, demonstrating Sound Judgement, and Building Trust are most strongly associated with agreement that one’s immediate superior is an effective leader” (Riley, Cavanaugh, Fallesen, & Jones, 2016, p. 23). Simultaneously, the report shows that the confidence for junior leaders (specifically, junior NCOs) is not as high (Riley, Cavanaugh, Fallesen, & Jones, 2016, p. 81). How do NCO’s learn how to lead in this environment? When senior leaders do not show trust to subordinates, the subordinate’s ability to lead troops is stunted. Imagine the number of leaders who do not know how to lead because it was never modeled for them. Honestly, they were not trusted to lead in the first place. In fact, the 2015 CASAL report notes that, “subordinates report low levels of trust in leaders who they perceive to demonstrate counterproductive leadership” (Riley, Cavanaugh, Fallesen, & Jones, 2016, p. 82). In order to develop the necessary trust, leaders must trust their abilities to coach, teach, and mentor their soldiers. A first-rate leader allows his/her subordinates to execute tasks because they trust their own ability to train, and the abilities of their Soldiers.

**A Way Ahead**

Given the above, what is the way ahead? I propose the following as a way ahead to help develop leadership across all platforms and formations. First, leaders must learn how to trust. This effect has quantifiable results, as demonstrated in the CASAL Military Leaders Findings. This means trusting that they have the skills to effectively train those for which they are responsible. If an NCO does not have a proficiency in training, use peer mentoring to help develop that NCO. Ideally, a formation should maintain its level of lethality because NCO’s are willing and able to ensure not only the success of their own formation, but for their fellow NCO’s formations as well. This is a much more effective use of the NCOPD model and can develop NCO comradery which would build bonds between peers.

Second, NCO leaders must trust their soldiers. This means that a leader must understand that they cannot mitigate every possible outcome. Soldiers will make choices which may lead to a negative outcome. This does not reflect on a lack of leadership. Rather, it demonstrates a level of trust that the NCO has, and given that freedom, shows that the Soldier may not have the necessary ability to make choices which would be in the best interest of their team. Put another way, leaders must trust that their Soldiers will make good choices. In the case that they do not, it is another way to evaluate the leadership potential of those in their formation.

Third, NCO’s must trust that they know how to lead and train. This is perhaps the most difficult, as establishing a measureable standard of success can easily devolve into yet another power point slide presentation. It must always be remembered that leadership and trust cannot be reflected in a binary. In other words, because a leader makes sure that their formation is not red or black on a particular task does not mean they are an effective leader. Effectiveness of leadership is demonstrated when the NCO trains his/her formation, and the Soldiers execute the task at hand because they have been trusted to do so, and know the standard. This is where the wealth of institutional knowledge that NCOs hold can be leveraged to grow future leaders and provide a 360-degree model of leadership development. Senior NCOs must move away from the idea that the style of leadership that they have developed is the only way in which leadership can be executed. By leveraging different leadership styles, NCOs can positively impact the unit and create a healthy organization by embracing the strengths found across Army formations.

**CONCLUSION**

In order for the US Army to maintain its place as the preeminent force, it is necessary to develop leaders who are trusted to make sound decisions in the face of bad circumstances. Additionally, the freedom to lead requires a level of trust from the senior levels of an organization. If the mission is to coach, teach, and mentor the next generation of leaders, then this generation must be given the opportunity to refine their leadership style. From there, the NCO Corps will remain the “Backbone of the Army”, and provide the highest levels of professionalism in the military.

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