

Strengthening Army Leadership Courses by Training Adaptability

By Members of the First Engineer Command and Staff Course¹

Recently, Dr. Leonard Wong published a monograph examining the adaptability of deployed junior officers. “Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom” provides an insightful look into the minds of today’s young leaders. In his monograph, Dr. Wong challenges the Army to “acknowledge and encourage this newly developed adaptability in our junior officers or risk stifling the innovation critically needed in the Army’s future leaders.”² His work is significant because it confronts the Army’s senior leadership with a problem that may greatly affect the force during future deployments. This article uses the framework from Dr. Wong’s monograph to provide recommendations for improvement to officer leadership courses. In order to prepare future leaders for the conventional battlefield, leadership courses should train on nontraditional leadership roles (for example, civil affairs, project management, and fund management), provide a compilation of after-action reviews (AARs) and lessons learned from deployments, and establish a more in-depth mentor program.

Dealing With Complexity

Analysis

Structured training does not foster adaptive leadership. Current missions in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, in many cases, are not mission-essential tasks. Over the last few years, junior officers have grown accustomed to executing missions with only a task and purpose. This change in mission structure has created a new breed of creative, adaptable leaders.

Company grade officers will serve as a catalyst for change because of the full spectrum of operations encountered in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. It is critical that senior leaders recognize the method by which their junior officers accomplished real-world missions. Further, it is essential for senior leaders to support the ideas of their junior officers in the garrison and training environment.

Dr. Wong describes four major areas that necessitate adaptable leaders:

- **Complex Roles.** Deployed company grade officers operate in a dynamic environment. As well, they have additional duties in which they have little formal training. In the span of a day, these officers are required to be leaders, warriors, peacekeepers, and nation builders.

- **Cultural Complexity.** Deployed company grade officers become increasingly aware of the cultural impacts on their mission. Neglecting to train Soldiers on the effects of culture can have large-scale implications for today’s military.
- **Complex Warfare.** Today’s battlefield presents complex situations. Junior officers have to balance between restrictive rules of engagement (ROE), civilians on the battlefield, and a need to accomplish the mission.
- **Complexity Through Change.** Contemporary enemy forces are adaptive and innovative. They seek to create instability and havoc at the tactical level. To maintain situational control and gain tactical surprise, coalition forces engage in high-payoff, short-notice missions.

Recommendations

Complex Roles. The overarching situation is how to produce adaptive leaders in the Army. The first step starts in the U.S. Army Engineer School by teaching our junior leaders roles other than traditional engineer leadership (for example, squad leaders, platoon leaders, and company commanders). For the second step, we must understand that regardless of our military occupational specialty (MOS), we are Soldiers first. The third step is to allow all Soldiers involvement in and access to AARs.

- The most notable areas currently neglected by the Army’s Junior Officer Development Program relate to civil affairs operations and funds management (outside of the company’s budget). Civil affairs serves a wide spectrum of operations, which many junior leaders face daily during a deployment. Likewise, funds management deals with pay agent issues such as workforce management of local nationals. Junior leaders must have, at a minimum, baseline information (involving money from higher echelons) to allow adaptation to any situation.

As leaders, our experiences are valuable to junior leaders. We should share these experiences with future leaders. Near- and long-term solutions are mentoring programs, small-group meetings, and training exercises without troops (TEWTs). In addition, captains in the Engineer Command and Staff Course (ECSC) can write professional papers on lessons learned during deployment or in garrison, with the opportunity for publishing.³

- In the second step, Soldiers must understand that they are Soldiers first, regardless of the MOS. While deployed, the



Speedway forward arming and refueling point

operating environment is dynamic; one minute you may be handing out pencils to school children and the next minute be caught in a firefight. Company-level training must reflect this element and be supported two levels higher, unlike the traditional “trickle-down” training driven by higher echelons. The training must excite Soldiers. Soldiers are not set up for success when every field exercise is identical. During a deployment, Soldiers are functioning outside the job description of their MOS. Junior leaders must be prepared for this and should implement the diversions and real-world application into training.

- The third way to get all Soldiers involved is by allowing participation in and examination of AARs. When higher echelons withhold lessons learned, company grade leaders are forced to “reinvent the wheel” by designing tactics, techniques, and procedures that already exist. Leaders of all levels need access to AARs, which—by definition—are for future training through implementation of specific problem-solving methods.

Junior leaders need flexibility. Given the tools, they should be allowed to “wander off of the reservation” during training. They must train in garrison without excessive influence from higher headquarters, which prepares them for the real-world theater of operations.

Cultural Complexity. When deploying outside of the United States, almost every facet of life is drastically different from life in America. Many U.S. Soldiers have never been

outside of the country, let alone had to deal with people who are often scared of or hate Americans. Junior leaders must set the example for how to act toward local nationals. Consequently, cultural training for junior leaders is crucial to the success of a deployment.

It is unrealistic to expect that training will completely prepare a Soldier for a deployment. However, it is important for junior leaders to have training to “know what they don’t know.” A possible fix is for Soldiers who have deployed to the theater of operations—within the recent past—to brief units preparing to deploy. In addition, the Soldiers could include simple issues such as eating, greeting, working with men/women, and controlling crowds.

An immediate addition to ECSC should be a class during the leadership foundations module to discuss cultural awareness. It is likely our generation of officers will continue to face conflicts at the company level in the Middle East. There is sufficient experience to teach such a class among students who have recently deployed. A possible long-term solution is for students to compile cultural lessons learned, complete with scenarios. These scenarios will challenge junior officers during the tactics phase of ECSC. They will force captains to learn how to apply doctrinal thinking while thinking creatively, based on a region’s customs and courtesies.

Complex Warfare. ROE take on many forms and vary from mission to mission. The problem for leaders becomes how to enforce and abide by the ROE. The critical component of establishing and enforcing the ROE is communicating a higher

echelon's intent. Too often on the nonlinear battlefield, the situation changes quickly from nation building to tactical engagement and back again. The Soldier must quickly determine who is the enemy. Improperly crossing this delicate line will disrupt months of work and effort spent on fostering a positive relationship with the local nationals. It is essential for leaders to war-game scenarios, which provides guidance on potential situations.

The immediate and near-term action at the U.S. Army Engineer School should be to place a greater importance on discussing the ROE while conducting the military decision-making process (MDMP). Although time is limited in the training environment, any increase in incorporating the ROE into the scenarios will help leaders. The long-term solution involves collecting and compiling lessons learned from the AARs of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. A collection of real situations, the actions taken, and the lessons learned from those actions would be a valuable tool that company grade officers could take away. It would facilitate in-depth discussions and provide leaders with a practical training tool for various ROE scenarios.

Complexity Through Change. A near- and long-term response to this issue could be the implementation of a leadership mentor program for ECSC. Throughout each module, (common core, leadership fundamentals, tactics, and construction) captains need direct input to the MDMP—formal and informal, mundane and exciting. The end state is for field grade officers (focusing on the battalion commander) to take a team under their “mentorship wing.” Mentors could focus discussions on tactical and garrison topics and provide vital input on what they think is important for success as a company commander and as a future leader in today's (and tomorrow's) Army.

During the common-core module, mentors could come in—at least once—and meet with smaller groups (divide the class in half or thirds) in a seminar format. The mentors could lead the discussion, focusing strictly on topics of recent discussion in class. This would require that the small-group leaders send read-ahead packets to the mentors, ensuring that both the captains and the mentors were discussing the same topics.

The leadership fundamentals module mimics the previous process. However, the focus would shift to garrison-type scenarios, which the mentor would discuss with the captains. As with the first module, small-group leaders would ensure that the mentors received read-ahead packets and would coordinate for time available to conduct the mentor sessions.

During the tactics module, the mentors (divided into teams, which would require four or five mentors) could spot-check the planning, as the captains learned the MDMP. The class would receive the mission and begin to plan, with input from the team's assigned mentor. The input would pertain to the mission and planning (teacher/trainer). The first mission analysis brief should be a walk-through with the mentor to ensure that the captains are heading in the right direction.

There would be times established for when the mentor would be available to assist in the MDMP with the captains, for either the current or the next mission. The mentor would receive at least one brief (mission analysis, course of action analysis/approval, or operation order [OPORD]), and for each mission during the phase, would assist with refining the team's planning process. Additionally, with the availability of a mentor, the team would be able to plan the more complex/full-spectrum operations that the Army is facing worldwide. The mentor would assist the small-group leader by providing input on potential missions and training conducted with the captains. The capstone for this portion of training would be an OPORD brief to the mentor from the captains on the final task force mission.

Mentorship during the construction module could focus again on the more mundane, yet time-consuming activities of company command. The mentors would again meet with the captains, at least twice during the module, to discuss the issues of taking command and making that command successful—through topics at the discretion of the mentor. The last sessions with the mentor would allow the captains to ask questions not conceived of earlier in the course, helping to send the captains forward with confidence. The captains would also have a point of contact that they feel comfortable with after they leave the ECSC—should issues arise.

In addition, the ECSC student would establish a command relationship with the battalion commander or a senior leader of the student's follow-on unit. The receiving commander should send the student the command philosophy, top five training focus areas, and additional information to help the student. This commander could also be involved in the incoming captain's command philosophy developed during the common core module. Instead of a “check-the-block” memo, there would now be a document, approved by the captain's future commander.

The mentoring process needs to extend throughout the ECSC, from the first weeks of common core and leadership fundamentals, through tactics, and then finish with construction. It would ensure that captains understood their battalion commanders' intent and philosophies before conducting those first crucial inventories upon assuming command.

To maximize the opportunities created by the captain mentorship program, all captains must be involved in mentoring lieutenants attending the Officer Basic Course. Captains should discuss personal lessons learned, as well as secondhand experiences from their mentors and future commanders. Lieutenants now have a point of contact to ask questions and gain useful insights into their future jobs. The class schedule should allot time for the mentorship program. In addition, captains and lieutenants should get together at functions such as leader lunches and right-arm nights (where everyone meets at the officers club). The program would be a success if school leaders made it a priority.

Summary

A new breed of creative, adaptable leaders exists in the Army's junior officer ranks. It is vital that senior leaders recognize and support the methodology by which their junior officers accomplish real-world missions. Further, it is essential for Army leadership courses to encourage adaptable thinking and to prepare young officers for nontraditional leadership roles. In order to better train leaders on adaptability, leadership courses should train on irregular leadership roles, provide a compilation of AARs and lessons learned from deployments, and establish a more in-depth mentor program. 

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Endnote

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² Leonard Wong, "Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom," Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, 2004, p. v.

³ *Engineer* encourages submission of articles. Check the Web site at <<http://www.wood.army.mil/engrmag/submit%20article.htm>> for the Engineer Writers Guide, which gives more information on article requirements.