

The Profession of Arms and Professional Soldier Campaign: What Does That Mean?

By Chief Warrant Officer Four Shaun M. Collins

The U.S. Army Profession of Arms and Professional Soldier Campaign kicked off at the beginning of 2011. To understand what this means to us as members of a “profession of arms,” we must first ask ourselves what it means to be members of a profession. One of the primary reasons that Army senior leaders initiated this campaign was to evoke deep contemplation and self-reflection, which should, in turn, lead to some substantial adjustments to our current beliefs and actions. These changes are expected to significantly impact leader development and our approach to the measurement of success, while improving our focus on mission accomplishment and helping to create the most ethical environment possible.

The first question we should ask ourselves is this: “Do we belong to a profession or a bureaucracy?” A *profession* is defined as “a vocation or occupation requiring advanced education and training and involving intellectual skills, as medicine, law, theology, engineering, teaching, etc.”¹ A *bureaucracy* is defined as “the administration of government through departments and subdivisions managed by sets of appointed officials following an inflexible routine.”² But the question of whether we belong to a profession or a bureaucracy is not as simple to answer as we might think; we must truly reflect on what our profession is and what it means to be a professional within it. How do we operate? And are we actually contributing to a profession? Let’s examine some of the things that are done Army-wide nearly every day.

From what I can ascertain, the Travel Risk Planning System—including the vehicle inspection process—was designed to help prevent injuries and deaths of our Soldiers—specifically those in the grades of E-1 through E-6 with less than six years of service, who typically engage in the most high-risk behavior and frequently operate poorly maintained vehicles. The system was apparently designed to ensure that leaders help junior personnel evaluate their recreational activities, consider appropriate risk mitigation tools, and operate safe vehicles in a safe manner. At some point, though, these became standard procedures for everyone. But who inspects the battalion commander’s vehicle? The command sergeant major’s vehicle? The chief warrant officer’s vehicle? If we were to take a look, I think we would find that inspection sheets have been completed for these vehicles; but I also think it is unlikely that anyone left the building to complete them. Unfortunately, this practice has become standard across the board; and today, Soldiers think nothing

of completing this “false official statement.” They rationalize that everybody else is doing the same thing and everyone knows it. However, if we have someone else physically inspect our senior leaders’ vehicles, we send a clear signal that no one is ever mature enough to ensure that his or her own vehicle is safe to drive, responsible enough to make his or her own decisions, or capable enough to take action. Both of these situations send damaging messages to our young Soldiers. Had we maintained our focus on the demographic that actually required the additional attention, the Travel Risk Planning System would probably still be a viable tool; however, it is not. Instead, we have implemented the system in such a way that we have created an undercurrent of unethical conduct that erodes the very fabric of our profession.

Quarterly counseling sessions were also designed to engage leaders to assist their subordinates. But if we were to take an honest look at when and how counseling statements are completed, we would find that the forms are filled out merely to meet requirements—not to meet the needs of the individuals who receive them. Consequently, very little meaningful counseling ever really takes place.

There are dozens of other similar examples ranging from mandatory standards-of-conduct training (which is repeatedly presented to Soldiers throughout their careers, despite no changes in the standards and little likelihood that Soldiers will forget those standards) to the distributed learning Antiterrorism Level 1 Course (which most Soldiers quickly skim through to reach the end-of-course scenario questions with easy-to-predict answers).

So, what are we focusing on—the requirement or the need? Are we preparing our units to pass inspections or to accomplish the mission? Are we training our personnel to meet mandated standards or to achieve optimal performance? Are we documenting and reporting our mistakes simply to ensure that we are “covered,” or are we underwriting them and using them as training opportunities? We all tend to focus on areas in which we are graded; so if we are graded on documents that show what we have done, then our focus is on getting those documents completed.

Every Army process was designed to help us achieve a specific objective; however, because processes are easily measurable and gradable, they have become the objective and we have lost sight of the original intent. We have

created a culture in which we merely “meet requirements” or “pencil whip” documentation and, in the process, have eroded the ethical development of our organizations. As we slide further into this rut, we are leaving our Soldiers stagnant, ill-prepared, increasingly inflexible, and afraid to make decisions. In short, we are making them afraid to grow!

To develop strong leaders, we need to train and enable them. We need to hold subordinates accountable, when appropriate; and we need to underwrite honest mistakes. We need to expose Soldiers to processes, but only after they understand the intended objectives and realize that a process is only a means of achieving an objective. Processes that are put into place to help Soldiers accomplish specific tasks or missions should not be used as the scale to measure success. It is the successful accomplishment of a task or mission itself that should be evaluated—not the path that is taken to get there.

If Soldiers successfully accomplish an assigned task or mission without using the process that was designed to help get them there, then the process and the standard may need to be reevaluated to determine whether they are still relevant. A high failure rate may also indicate the need for a reevaluation to ensure that the standard is achievable with the personnel and resources available.

While some processes were derived as a result of safety issues, others were adopted as a means to an end. When safety is the reason for the prescribed sequence of steps, the process must be enforced as developed. In situations with an arbitrary process, the performance of steps in the proper sequence is less important than the successful completion of the task, regardless of the method of execution or order in which the steps are performed. Rather than stifling our Soldiers, we should be encouraging their independent thought and problem-solving skills. Otherwise, we are likely to produce an army of robots who do only as they are told. We cannot afford to create a force in which Soldiers do nothing because there is no one available to authorize action or tell them how to go about accomplishing their mission. We need to stop developing our leaders using a “what to think” approach and start focusing on “how to think.”

Of course, there are also mandatory training, standard, and process requirements, such as those associated with the Prevention of Sexual Harassment, Equal Opportunity/Equal Employment Opportunity, Information Assurance, Human Trafficking, and Operations Security Programs. While the reason behind the initial development of these and a myriad of other mandatory requirements may be evident, we are obligated to frequently evaluate these requirements to ensure that we are fulfilling the original need and that the Soldier is ultimately benefiting from our efforts. At some point we need to say, “We’ve got it” and stop expending precious

time and resources on reinforcing clearly defined standards of conduct. We should present standards early in Soldiers’ careers, require them to sign a document indicating that they understand and agree to abide by them, and hold individuals who deviate from the standards accountable for their actions.

We need to use common sense—not blanket practices. Does it make sense for an E-5 to provide classroom instruction on cold-weather driving to an E-3 who has never driven in winter conditions? Does it make sense for the E-5 to provide that training to an E-7 who has been successfully driving in cold weather for 20 years? Should the training be conducted in a classroom—or should it consist of practical, hands-on instruction? Which of these methods will better prepare the Soldier? Taking the common-sense approach allows us to, once again, use our training time to build technical expertise rather than engage in “check the block” training designed to “prove” that an errant individual was recently instructed not to engage in inappropriate conduct. If we fail to use common sense and logic in leading Soldiers, how can we expect them to do so in conducting their missions?

I strongly believe that we are all members of a profession; however, our profession is at risk of being taken over by bureaucracy. I believe that this is why our most senior leaders considered the Profession of Arms and Professional Soldier Campaign to be necessary. We need to take the time to reevaluate each aspect of the culture around us and ask ourselves if it adds value or if it is merely a bureaucratic requirement that is no longer relevant. We need to ensure that our Army is a professional organization that always values leader development and mission accomplishment over prescribed processes and “cookie cutter” approaches. We need to constantly ask ourselves: “Is this value-added to the Soldier on the ground?” “Does this contribute to optimal performance?” “Does this negate a previous requirement?” And, of course, “Am I a member of a profession or a bureaucracy?” We need to stop trying to make a difference and BE the difference! 

Endnotes:

¹*Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, Wiley Publishing, Inc., Cleveland, Ohio, 2010.

²*Ibid.*

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