Strengthening the Regiment:

Mentorship, Leader Development, and the Engineer Community

By Lieutenant Colonel Diana M. Holland

Developing good leaders for the future is one of the most important and professionally satisfying goals that senior officers can hope to achieve. The future of the United States Army depends on the success of that goal, and our junior officers deserve the investment of time and resources to help them reach their potential. Professional development and mentorship have become increasingly important topics of discussion in the Army over the past decade. At the same time, our junior officers face a growing number of challenges to their sense of professional commitment. The challenges have emerged Armywide but, in some respects, engineer officers are at a greater disadvantage than those in other branches. The changing force structure has decreased the size of engineer communities on many installations, and the high operational tempo has prevented smaller engineer communities from developing camaraderie and cohesiveness. Therefore, engineer leaders must find creative ways to mentor, coach, counsel, or train junior leaders, not only for the officers' individual development but also for the larger goal of strengthening the engineer community.

A Generational Divide

The Army is operating and transforming so quickly that it is difficult to predict how it will be organized ten years from now. Personnel management and career progression have become unpredictable, yet these areas will have significant long-term ramifications for the future force. To those commissioned in the 1980s and early 1990s, the career landscape facing junior officers today is unfamiliar. It may seem as though there is a generational divide.

Both generations of officers have deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq multiple times, but the deployment rigor can have greater impact on a young officer than it does on one who is more senior. The older generation was more invested in, and acclimated to, the military profession by 11 September 2001. Those officers had served ten to fifteen years by the time the War on Terrorism began, and if the strain became too much, they would be able to retire in the near future. They may already have enjoyed assignments away from the tactical Army, such as in the Advanced Civil Schooling programs and in utilization assignments in the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command or the civilian world. Families were already accustomed to the military lifestyle. These observations cannot be applied universally and are not intended to trivialize the impact of multiple deployments on older and more established military Families. However, they should be considered as we engage our younger officers.

Challenges for Junior Officers

Many junior officers had a second War on Terrorism deployment when they had just three to five years in Service. They excel at preparing to deploy and at being deployed because that is all they know. They believe it is all they will do if they stay in the Army. For officers with Families, the challenge is probably greater. Single officers may wonder if it is possible to start a Family with so little time at home station. Under these circumstances, even the most dedicated officers might question their commitment to an Army career.

The Army has long practiced the two-levels-down approach to engaging and developing junior officers. Brigade commanders receive readiness briefings from company commanders. Battalion commanders target platoon leaders for professional development. The critical component of the officer

efficiency report is the senior rater block. Yet the emerging engineer force structure increasingly is not well-served by such practices. As already mentioned, few engineer battalions will be colocated with an engineer brigade. Thus, on an installation that does not have an engineer brigade, the only engineer-pure, two-levels-down relationship will be between a battalion commander and the lieutenants. Under the two-levels-down paradigm, an engineer company commander will not be the focus of professional development by a leader of his or her branch. The same is true for a lieutenant in a sapper company organic to the modular brigade combat team (BCT).

In addition to those challenges shared by junior officers across the Army, engineers are at a greater disadvantage—we have lost much of our community. The current generation of battalion and brigade commanders remember when two or three levels of engineer headquarters were located at one installation. Almost all engineer lieutenants had an engineer company commander and most had an engineer battalion commander. Many served close to their engineer brigade commanders. That force structure was conducive to fostering a community to which engineers belonged. Of course, subordinate engineer elements were often task-organized under, formed habitual relationships with, and benefited from combined arms experiences with maneuver units. But, ultimately, they still belonged to an engineer chain of command that fostered interaction between senior and junior officers of our branch. Unfortunately, the interim and end-state force structures have reduced those opportunities.

Many of today's lieutenants and junior captains do not have an extensive and enduring engineer chain of command. If they are serving in a modular BCT, they have an engineer company commander and, in some cases, infantry or armor battalion and brigade commanders. In other cases, they are assigned to a BCT special troops battalion where they may have an engineer, military police, or military intelligence commander. None of those young officers have an engineer brigade commander. If junior engineers are assigned to one of the few installations with an engineer brigade, they may become part of an engineer family while not deployed. However, the engineer battalions and companies deploy so frequently that the officers face a constantly changing task organization and probably will not have time to develop a tight community.

The training and readiness authority (TRA) policy is a move in the right direction and has the potential to benefit the separate combat effects and construction effects battalions. These units will enjoy relationships with engineer brigades because of the latter's training, personnel, and materiel

Photo by Captain Charles Scheibe

Soldiers discuss road repair lessons learned during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

responsibilities. However, many battalions are not assigned to the same installations as their TRA brigade, and because of the distances between these headquarters, it will be difficult to maintain relationships. The geographically separated battalions will naturally develop stronger associations with the units on their own posts, and TRA brigades may be tempted to take a "hands off" approach to ease logistical and time restraints for all parties.

The point of this discussion is not to criticize the ongoing transformation of the branch. In fact, modularity has brought many benefits to the Engineer Regiment. Leaders and Soldiers have experienced worthwhile training and combat opportunities by serving closely with maneuver units. By forming sapper companies organic to a BCT, these engineers have a clear command and control (C2) relationship and are fully integrated into a combined arms team. Engineer leaders serving under infantry and armor commanders are exposed to a variety of professionally rewarding experiences. Likewise, because of the evolving C2 and support relationships in Iraq and Afghanistan, combat effects and construction effects battalions are also executing nontraditional missions that broaden their capabilities. Nonetheless, it is important that future senior engineer commanders consider how the changing force structure affects junior officers in the Regiment and develop a plan to mitigate its potential negative effects.

Recommendations

Engineer leaders should expand professional development opportunities beyond conventional boundaries and mentor, develop, and coach as many subordinate officers as possible. In engineer battalions, the commanders must assume greater responsibility for developing company commanders, in addition to their traditional focus on lieutenants. Company commanders will also have to develop platoon leaders. While a company commander is seldom more than a couple of years older than his or her lieutenants, that commander will have to demonstrate the maturity necessary to guide other company grade officers.

The responsibility for developing junior engineer officers should not be limited to the chain of command. Division engineers, brigade engineers, and other engineer staff officers should seek opportunities to interact with engineer lieutenants and captains. A division engineer can invite sappers from the BCTs to conferences that address engineer issues. Brigade engineers can interact with junior engineer officers in the BCT. Essentially, we have to find ways to be counselors, coaches, and mentors to young engineers, no matter what our position.

Leaders of TRA brigades must also take an active role in professional development. Though difficult to sustain, it is important that the engineer brigade and battalion commanders foster relationships between the officers at both levels. If the TRA brigade deploys, the brigade and rear detachment commanders must find ways to monitor and guide their battalions. One good idea circulating in the Regiment recommends that a recently retired engineer colonel be brought back to active duty and assigned as a brigade rear detachment commander. Such a move would maintain senior engineer leadership for engineer battalions that are not deployed.

Leaders of the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) districts and divisions can also assist in building regional engineer communities. USACE organizations have more stability than operational Army engineer units and bring a wealth of technical expertise to the force. In many cases, relationships already exist. It is common for a deployed battalion to reach back to USACE for advice and support. When not deployed, these relationships should be strengthened. Few company grade officers know much about USACE. Exposing them to the Corps's unique missions and capabilities might inspire junior officers to seek further career opportunities beyond the operational Army. Furthermore, senior officers in the districts and divisions can serve as sources of engineer experience outside the formal chain of command. Thus, USACE and tactical engineer unit leaders should work to increase interaction to benefit junior officers.

Assessing progress is an important step in any training event, and it is just as important when measuring the effectiveness of developing engineer leaders and building cohesive engineer teams. The Army has formalized processes for measuring personnel, training, medical, and logistical readiness, but it has established only marginal guidelines for assessing our effectiveness at growing engineer leaders and teams. How do we know if we are making a difference? How do we improve if we are not meeting our goal? These are difficult questions, and the answers partly depend on the situation. Consistently high-performing units might indicate success, but the relationship of cause and effect may not be conclusive. In any case, the starting point is communication and engagement. Gather engineers together and ask them what they think.

Field Manual 6-22, *Army Leadership*, offers guidance on how to assess organizational climate and developmental needs; it also identifies the characteristics of a close team.[1] This guidance can be adapted to evaluating success in building a cohesive engineer community. For example, an engineer leader might ask, "What were your expectations of the Regiment, and is it

Photo by Captain Jonathan Gill

A company commander coaches a subordinate officer as their unit prepares for a major road repair mission in Iraq.

living up to those expectations?" Other questions might include, "Do you believe that at the conclusion of the current transformation initiative, there will be more opportunities for career progression than there are now?" or "Have you had the opportunity to discuss career progression with a senior engineer officer?" From this or a similar line of questioning, a leader will be able to gauge attitudes toward the branch and develop a plan to sustain or improve perceptions. Such an effort will strengthen the bonds not only between individuals but eventually within the larger engineer community.

Conclusion

The Army ensures that leaders train their units, maintain their equipment, and deploy their organizations to a combat zone, and it measures the progress of those tasks. However, it does not formally or aggressively enforce leader development and team building. Taking the time to focus on those two areas requires extra effort at a time when most leaders are overstretched and the evolving force structure compounds this challenge for engineers. Nonetheless, it is imperative that engineer leaders find ways to interact with as many officers as possible and strengthen engineer bonds. If successful, the Regiment will be a better community and continue to attract and retain high-caliber officers.

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Endnote

[1] Field Manual 6-22, *Army Leadership*, October 2006.