

Lead The Way

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Developing junior NCOs is the number one priority for senior NCOs in our formation. First of all, we owe it to the newly inducted NCOs, and it begins with telling them what our expectations are. One of the first things we should say to them is “As the newest member of the NCO Corps, I expect you to be, know, and enforce the following standards we’ve laid out in our unit. These standards will help you maintain discipline in your team. This is what right looks like.”

The young NCOs will already have a good idea of what’s expected of them, just from observing the NCOs in the platoon. But now we have to show them the art behind the science of leading Soldiers in garrison and in combat. And it’s a long process that can’t be completed in a simple counseling session. The senior NCO’s responsibility goes way beyond that. I tell newly graduated Soldiers from the Warrior Leaders Course that I don’t expect them to be the masters of all facets in leading a team or a squad right away, but I do expect them to be the masters one year from now. There’s a lot of paddling going on under the water that first year, and it takes the squad leader, platoon sergeant, and first sergeant to keep them on the right path.

I can’t say it any better than our own Sergeant Major of the Army, CSM Kenneth O. Preston.

“To understand how standards and discipline are related, you have to start with the basic premise of how we grow sergeants in the Army. This is a basic three-step process:”

“Step One is to establish a standard. The items we wear on the uniform or carry with us is a standard, usually according to a unit SOP. The preventive maintenance checks and services (PMCS) we perform on our HMMWV in the motor pool are done to a standard outlined in the operator’s manual. A patrol of Soldiers coming off mission in Baghdad, Iraq, clear their weapons upon entering their base camp according to the standard published in the weapons handling procedures developed by the Safety Center.”

“Now with an understanding of standards, Step Two is to put someone in charge of enforcing the standards. This is where the sergeant is now responsible for his or her piece of the Army—those three or four Soldiers. It is the sergeant who conducts daily inspections of Soldiers’ uniforms. It is the sergeant who conducts precombat checks (PCC) of his or her Soldiers’ arms and equipment before going out on patrol...”



“Step Three in growing our leaders is to hold the sergeant accountable. This is where the more senior leaders above the sergeant have their responsibility. To see what is being done to standard, senior leaders have to inspect.”

Okay, now why don’t our senior NCOs help develop the junior NCOs? Here’s an example: I was watching a PFC in the gunner’s hatch of an M1151, obviously having problems with his M2 machine gun. I watched him struggle with it for about 10 minutes. In those 10 minutes, three NCOs walked right by the Soldier and ignored him. So I went over to the PFC and asked him what the problem was, and he said he couldn’t get through the function check. I climbed up on the HMMWV, looked at it, and found that the timing was off. He said he didn’t know anything about the timing and asked if I could fix it for him. I yelled out for his team leader, got him behind the machine gun, and told him to fix the timing. He fumbled around a few minutes before giving up. I went through the squad leader, platoon sergeant, and first sergeant and couldn’t find anyone that knew how to adjust the timing. So I excused the Soldier and we NCOs had a little class on setting the head space and timing on a .50 caliber machine gun.

I think our senior NCOs have lost their basic combat skills. And we expect them to also be proficient at small-unit tactics and MOS proficiency? Some NCOs have said that we spend too much time training tactics and not enough time on MOS proficiency. We should remember that a lot of stuff happens between the FOB and the Objective. It’s the world we live and fight in, and all that technical proficiency doesn’t do anyone any good if you can’t even make your way to the dance.

A holistic approach to training in garrison and in combat is possible, even with the predeployment timelines we have today. The Schoolhouse has a limited amount of time with Soldiers and can’t train them on everything. I see the year after OSUT, BNCOC, and ANCOG as the critical times in an NCO’s development. The field has to pick up the ball and carry the NCO’s technical and tactical education to an acceptable level of competency. Lives depend on it.

Hopefully this article will spark some interest, or controversy, from the field and produce articles we can share throughout the Regiment. I don’t pretend to have all the answers. But I know we can find the solution if the Regiment as a whole lays hold and heaves.