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The succession of rapid, long duration deployments has eroded the quality of NCO leadership within the United States Army. The United States Army Non Commissioned Officer Corps has always been considered the “back bone” of Army leadership. The role of the NCO is arguably the most important component of mission execution and completion. It is the Non Commissioned Officer that leads the soldiers that accomplish those missions. In order to ensure mission success, the NCO must be a uniquely diversified leader. They must be able to train, lead, discipline and communicate with their subordinates and superiors in order to accomplish any prescribed mission. However, this type of leadership is rarely an innate trait and often takes years of training to produce competency. As deployment cycles have increased and the demand for combat force has grown, the training and fundamentals of NCO development have been side-stepped, which has lead to a recent trend of ill equipped, NCO’s becoming part the leadership the Army depends so greatly upon.

Policy Change

Leadership in any realm is a tough and tedious job requiring perseverance, understanding and a whole host of other attributes that must be learned in order to be effective. Very few occupations though carry the weight of leadership that a United States Army NCO must carry. Mission failure within this context usually translates into loss of life or other detrimental issues. Until recently the Army required the NCO to meet certain training requirements either before or within an allotted amount of time after taking on a leadership role. However, due to recent changes in regulations and promotions a Non Commissioned Officer, now could feasibly be in a position of leadership two, maybe three years, and never really have to attend an NCOES based on three dates, promotion, deployment and ETS. This change in policy may allow for less strain

on the individual, but it translates in to failure for the Army as a whole. Standards cannot be lowered while maintaining the same expected outcome. While Army leaders must be cognizant of the toll of rapid deployments on the soldier, they cannot afford to sacrifice the training that is necessary to be a prepared fighting force.

Stressors on leaders

It is easy to see the effects of a long combat requirement on leaders. Within the officer ranks the long combat tours have resulted in a mass exodus of the lower commissioned ranks. “More than a third of the West Point Class of 2000, left active duty at the earliest possible moment, after completing their five year obligation” (Joyner, 2006). The NCO ranks have had their share of losses as well, but have maintained high retention numbers despite the current operational tempo. But, the Army’s increased demand for leaders has led to the lowering or elimination of many standards.

Recently, the requirement for soldier to appear before a promotion board was eliminated through the adoption of an automatic promotion system. Before this, senior leaders could assess the knowledge, and basic competency of a service member, before they were allowed to become part of the NCO Corps. The problem with the automatic promotion system is twofold. First, it assumes that everyone is capable and willing to become a leader. Second, it does not allow for any review process to be present in order to assess the capabilities of the individual. All other NCO ranks require the individual be reviewed either in person or by way of evaluation reports and training. In 1997 a study was done by RAND and the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, “to identify the assumptions that underpin the Army’s current Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) leader development mechanisms and to evaluate the robustness of those assumptions as the Army moves into the 21st Century”, (Rand, 1997). The interesting thing

about this study is it found that ten percent of those serving in the ranks from E4 to E6 actually worked or held positions one to two pay grades higher. Given the study was conducted during a time of peace, it is safe to assume that given today's increased demand that this percentage has most likely increased significantly. Now, not only does the Army have ill equipped leaders within the Non Commissioned officer ranks, they must use these leaders to fill positions far above the individual's capabilities and training. This can only lead to long term failure in multiple areas throughout the ranks. The solution is not a return to the way things once were.

Finding a new way

It is imperative to understand that the Army is in a new and unique position. What has worked in the past does not necessarily fit with the Army's current needs. According to the Sergeant Major of the Army we currently have a fighting force of, "548,000 active duty troops, of which 260,000 are deployed to 80 countries around the world", (Army, 2009). The operational tempo of the Army is perhaps at its peak. Never before has our force been engaged in combat, that has lasted as long as the current engagements. This has increased the demand for personnel. In order to fulfill this demand, sacrifices have had to be made. But one sacrifice that cannot be afforded is the lowering of leadership standards. For a two year period from 2000 to 2002 a study was conducted by the Army Training and Leader Development Panel (ATLDP) and TRADOC, "to determine training and leader development requirements that enable battlefield and operational success, and assess the development of the Army's NCO Corps to meet the demands of full spectrum operations"(Riley, 2002). In this study every facet of Non Commissioned officer training was assessed, as well, as the demands of the modern Army on the NCO. Eight imperatives were concluded during the summary of the study. Those imperatives included things such as; re-establishing and updating the NCO Guide, transforming NCOES now

for full spectrum operations in the contemporary operational environment and retool NCO assignments system to focus on leader development (Riley, 2002). This study further reinforces the fact that the Army cannot afford to lower the standards when it comes to the ranks of its leaders. In actuality in accordance with the findings of the Army Training and Leader Development Panel the standards for the training and development of the NCO should be increased. The demands that have now been placed on the NCO are beyond what most are prepared for. In fact it could be argued that some senior enlisted leaders are ill-equipped to handle the demands of today's Army.

Until recently the training of the Army Non Commissioned Officer has been focused on task specific duties. These tactics were based on cold-war era tactics and no longer apply to the Army's current role in global warfare. The Army is fully engaged on many different fronts. It no longer faces an enemy that is identified by a uniform. Instead it now faces invisible threats. Those threats come in the form of civilians and man-less ambushes. On the home-front the Soldier now faces strain on family ties, and prolonged time periods away from loved ones. For these reasons, the Non Commissioned Officer must be trained in a wide array of disciplines. Everything from tactics to compassion must be learned and implemented by today's NCO. In a very true sense today's Non Commissioned Officer must be a well versed leader, prepared to handle any situation. Yet, instead of focusing on this training and preparing the leaders of the Army for the challenges they will inevitably face, the Army has lowered requirements and standards for its leaders. However, it has been forced to make these sacrifices as a means to accomplish its missions. So how does the Army accomplish and meet the requirements of its current missions, throughout the world, while maintaining the high standards of leadership development?

Conclusion

There is no easy solution to this issue. The demands on the Army will likely continue to increase as more issues, and economical problems provoke more conflict, wars and other military warranted situations throughout the world. As such the Army will fulfill its requirement in each of these instances. But its success will lie solely on the preparedness of its leadership. According to a story published by Stars and Stripes, “Human Resources Command officials in Alexandria, Va., have identified 37,000 soldiers who have yet to deploy and have no reason not to serve in combat”, (Slavin, 2009). While this story broke just over a year ago, it is a great insight to the short comings of the Army’s Human Resources Command. This number translates into nearly 7% of the entire Army having never deployed, and yet are fully mission capable. While HRC has worked to move these individuals into deployed and deploying units to help alleviate the strain of multiple deployments on other soldiers, it is worth pointing out that those 37,000 Soldiers could account for 12 % of our deployed force, which means 12% of the deployed force could have a longer dwell time. More time allows for more time to train and prepare, as well as time with families. But more time home will not accomplish the goal of creating prepared leaders.

As it is now an NCO must complete a total of five different NCOES’ from E5 through E9. The length and content of these courses varies significantly, but given the fact that most NCO’s will hold or at some point hold a position higher than their current grade, it could be advantageous to combine some of the training programs. On becoming an NCO, the Service Member should be reassigned. This reassignment should be done in correlation with an NCOES. This would give the new NCO the basic knowledge of how to accomplish their mission and how

to perform as an NCO. Secondly it would allow for them to flow more easily into the leadership role, rather than having to try and pass on orders to those who were peers. Since it is likely the newly promoted E5 will work at the level of an E6 at some point in time. The training of Warrior Leader Course and Basic Non Commissioned Officer Course could be combined into a single training program. While the training may take longer than current NCOES', it would allow for less time overall away from the unit since there would be fewer training requirements. The benefits would be two fold. First, would be the fact that the training could be more comprehensive, exposing the NCO to different requirements of leadership. The second is that it would allow the NCO to be a better versed leader when assuming their duties.

In order for this type of training to take place the Non Commissioned Officer Corps would have to follow closely to the training format that commissioned officers follow. In that at certain points throughout their career, the NCO would be assigned to a specific training environment to focus solely on building their skills as a leader. Regardless, of the training design, the one immutable truth is that the United States Army cannot afford to cut corners or lower standards when it comes to the training of its leaders. This is evident through the amount of research and data collected throughout the past decade that all points to the relevance and importance of well trained leaders.

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