

Running Head: EVOLVING ROLE OF THE NCO

Evolving Role of the NCO in the American Military History Experience

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### Abstract

The three most important factors that have led to the ever-increasing empowerment of the American Noncommissioned Officer over time are cooperative leadership, a robust focus on NCO professional development, and the cultural evolution of decentralized authority. The fundamental causes and consequences of this shift in responsibilities down the chain of command are organizational commitment, professionalizing the force, and leader autonomy. The United States' military has well prepared its NCOs for the ever-increasing burdens of responsibility that have transpired through an evolving emphasis on NCO empowerment. This trend will continue if the NCO corps remains true to our foundational charter as small-unit trainer and disciplinarian, while staying relevant to the fluid requirements of today's battlefield and tomorrow's asymmetrical threat.

### Evolving Role of the NCO in the American Military History Experience

Armies win through cooperative leadership; thus, indicating shared responsibility. Commissioned officers do not lead unilaterally; rather, they foster a command climate in which their NCO counterparts--whom espouse similar principles--cooperate to make effective decisions. Unlike contemporary maverick leaders in the private sector, successful NCOs have evolved--and will continue to excel--through inclusion, not exclusion. Cooperative leadership was evolutionary in NCO empowerment, which is the fundamental catalyst of motivating subordinates, focusing organizational effort, and supporting commanders' vision and direction. NCOs who are encouraged to cooperatively lead empower first-line supervisors, peers, and officer counterparts to evolve through collaborative understanding. Our Cold War NCOs did not face asymmetric threats on multiple, fluid battlefields; today, cooperative leadership has empowered contemporary NCOs to confront and overcome concerns and challenges that previously did not exist. In order to be effective, the modern cadre of NCOs is expected to respond with ease to greater global uncertainty, deliver tangible effects with less delay, and improve productivity with fewer personnel; cooperative leadership is the solution to meet these demands. According to Bartelle (2009), cooperative leadership ensures that today's NCOs can fight and win on any battlefield while maintaining a successful level of career accomplishment and productivity.

While advising the commander on the unit's primary direction, the modern NCO's leadership role grew broader to include 'creative thinker' and 'tactician'. While the Officer's responsibility of command is situationally different than the NCO's scope of responsibility, they are foundationally rooted in a unified end-state: mission success and troop welfare. To remain relevant in a volatile world order, effective NCOs must constantly discover innovative methods

to improve their unit's success and increase performance using innovation and empowerment. Ultimately, cooperative leadership enables the NCO to empower personnel and maximize their unit's capabilities by influencing the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of warfare.

A robust focus on NCO professional development is the second most significant factor leading to the ever-increasing empowerment over time of the American Noncommissioned Officer. An enduring and robust focus on NCO development is absolutely essential to preparing our Army for the rigors of battle and further professionalizing the force. The role of the NCO Corps is foundationally one of disciplinarian and primary small unit trainer; however, aggressive holistic programs--that encourage the "whole-Soldier" concept--have revolutionized the contemporary NCO's professional development. According to Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-25, U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Guide (2008):

The Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Corps remains the backbone of our Army and the most professional NCO Corps in the World. Army Leader 21 is focused on continuing to train and educate a quality NCO Corps for the Army while expanding the NCO Corps role and professionalism by improving performance today and building the bench for tomorrow. The NCO must be fully capable of fighting a war and transforming in an era of unpredictability. The Pentathlete is a metaphor for the kind of leader our Army requires today and into the future. Our vision for the NCO Corps blends their past heritage with emerging future characteristics. "An innovative, competent professional enlisted leader grounded in heritage, values, and tradition that embodies the Warrior Ethos; champions continuous learning, and is capable of leading, training, and motivating Soldiers. An adaptive leader who is proficient in joint and combined expeditionary

warfare and continuous, simultaneous full spectrum operations, and resilient to uncertain and ambiguous environments” (1).

The above excerpt is especially poignant; it neatly codifies programs that encourage the 21st Century NCO as scholar and warrior. These contemporary methods selectively enable the modern NCO Corps to train core competencies and legacy tasks for the known fight, while remaining relevantly lethal in combating the asymmetric threat. The overwhelming advantages of NCO professional development are undeniable; therefore--in order to succeed in this competitive wartime environment--NCOs must aggressively seek and espouse continuing education.

A robust emphasis on NCO professional development also provides the training and information sharing to leverage the Army’s resources pursuant to a common goal: the training, education, and professional development of subordinate personnel to assume leadership functions and responsibilities in our absence. It is wise to address the growing concern of qualified and experienced NCO pools by enthusiastically pursuing strategies to raise awareness, make recommendations, and employ solutions to mitigate potential manning shortfalls. Ultimately, an Army-wide focus on NCO professional development is a vital method of increasing the current population of qualified leadership within our ranks; moreover, NCO professional development programs allow supervisors to have a better metric to assess direct-report personnel. Rating chain officials can give clearer guidance to augment their subordinates’ strengths and mitigate weaknesses; therefore, recommendations can be offered that assist in progress reviews and career path advice. Leaders at all levels should be aware of the significance of professional development and familiar with mentoring those to whom they are responsible.

The final most important factor that has led to the ever-increasing empowerment of the American Noncommissioned Officer over time is the cultural evolution of decentralized authority. This factor has enabled the NCO Corps to transition from one-dimensional garrison trainers to multi-dimensional combat leaders. This culture shift has not come easily; on the contrary, traditional military culture is steeped in bureaucracy and rigid conformity. Consequently, subordinates were not properly empowered; rather, developing NCOs who know how to think and not merely what to think starts with officer counterparts who trust their enlisted leadership with building the team.

In order for trust to be given, it must first be earned; NCOs must earn the trust of their officer counterparts through irreproachable behavior, mastery of the fundamentals, and unwillingness to accept mediocrity. Although the Army essentially operates under a codified caste system--i.e., a tiered arrangement--operational management should be "flattened" to the greatest extent possible. Leaders should be empowered to make decisions at the lowest possible level and--through accountability and responsibility--maintain a frank and open dialogue with seniors based on mutual trust and professional respect.

In summary, leaders should encourage operational decisions of strategic significance by being involved and accessible to subordinates without micromanaging or controlling their decision-making. This leadership style requires constant self-assessment and challenging one's subordinates while remaining focused on principal issues that are significant to organizational success. Winning organizations can accomplish this without being overbearing; supervisors should provide their direct report personnel with the freedom, resources, and training--indeed, the very tools for success--to complete their mission while maintaining operational transparency (Riley, 2002).

Counterarguments against cooperative leadership, a robust focus on NCO professional development, and the cultural evolution of decentralized authority as the preeminent indicators of NCO empowerment over time are skewed; rather, maintaining a heterogeneous hierarchy--or, the concept of encouraging diverse backgrounds and opposing points of view--maintains the status quo and encourages NCOs to focus on their primary charter as small unit trainer and disciplinarian. When NCOs lose focus on the intangibles--and the absence of strict adherence to standards--Soldiers under their charge begin to fail at the most menial of tasks and project apathy towards seniors.

In contrast, this antiquated method of thinking has disallowed NCOs to truly evolve and close the gap with their officer counterparts; indeed--as the NCO's role is scrutinized--care must be taken to safeguard our enduring function as the epitome of institutional leadership. The NCO corps embodies the unit's rational top-cover; perpetually guiding, directing, influencing, coaching, and mentoring--irrespective of rank or branch--all command members. Our officers expect us to remain committed to our primary functional charter as trainers and disciplinarians; however, we cannot be rigid and inflexible, failing to evolve and operate on the cusp of technology and dynamic change.

In closing, the future of the American military NCO corps is contingent on our ability to remain true to our foundational charter while staying relevant to the fluid requirements of today's battlefield and tomorrow's asymmetrical threat. Our enemies are constantly adapting their tactics, techniques, and procedures to mitigate our ability to mass forces and project overwhelming military power; consequently, the 21<sup>st</sup> century NCO corps must remain flexible while ruthlessly enforcing standards and maintaining discipline.

The NCO corps must remain obligated to fulfill a crucial function of the operational and institutional Army; while infrastructure and technology have augmented the manner in which wars are fought and won, it is the NCO who leverages battlefield victory. It is the NCO who provides the critical link between officer and enlisted, individual and organizational leadership, and tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. Moreover, the NCO personifies the ethical bond that encourages unit cohesion and fosters esprit-de-corps; while officers dictate policy, NCOs enforce execution. The NCO corps will always have the ear of the Soldier and--resultantly--their confidence; strengthened on the field of battle, no other bond could be greater. The enduring utility of the NCO corps is the metaphorical framework that supports daily institutional functions; thereby, maintaining operational continuity and strategic relationships. For these purposes, the NCO corps must continue to evolve and ensure that we remain relevant and focused “at the cutting edge of battle” (Gentry, 1974).

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