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## **The Modern NCO**

Professionalism, technology, and social changes have greatly affected the NCO's responsibilities over time. The NCO is not new to world militaries. The US Army borrowed ideas from other militaries at its inception. The NCO became the key to the new organization. While officers can earn a degree in Physical Education and become recognized as leaders, NCOs must first be soldiers and prove themselves capable advancing. In fact the NCO is proving him/herself throughout his career.

Professionalism and formalized training of NCOs have developed and advanced over the years. NCOs must discipline others by first disciplining themselves. Professional standards and expectations have increased for NCOs since the Army's inception. The role of the NCO has expanded considerably through the years from simply disciplinarian to include technician, counselor and general subject matter expert. Formalized training in the form of NCOES (Noncommissioned Officer Education System) has allowed consistent and repeatable training for all NCOs. Standardized training and decision making autonomy are two of the key factors that make the US Army NCO Corps the envy of the world. By integrating proven management and behavioral practices into military leadership training, the NCO is equipped with more tools to motivate and train soldiers. The true professional does not agree with all decisions nor does he/she pretend to; the real professional knows when to voice disagreement yet still carry out his/her orders without their opinions influencing performance.

The primary characteristic of the NCO is leadership. Leadership is defined as the process of influencing others in order to achieve some goal or outcome. Some would argue that the NCO has lost his ability or authority to lead because more restraint is

expected in the disciplining soldiers. Leadership in the military has often been characterized by authoritarianism and micromanagement. Many NCOs feel that their authority is undermined by modern policies and practices. What these NCOs fail to realize is that flexibility in all areas can be crucial to an NCO's and a unit's success. Just as soldiers must adapt to military life, NCOs must adapt to soldiers' changing lifestyles and motivations. Just because something is different than we are used to does not make it wrong. At one time in the Army the mixing of different races or genders in the same unit was considered wrong.

Technology has also had a profound effect on the NCO. The NCO is expected to be the subject matter expert in his/her field. When the officer or warrant officer has a problem they cannot solve they usually turn to the NCO. The NCO likely has more experience in a given area of expertise than anyone else. In addition to being proficient on basic soldier tasks such as marksmanship and physical fitness, the NCO must also master his/her specific occupational specialty. At one time the most technical task for an NCO could have been maintaining and operating a flintlock musket. Today an NCO may be maintaining a computer network or operating an X-Ray machine. A point of contention for highly skilled technical NCOs comes into play in regards to the NCO's expected duties. The technical specialist may not acquire the same leadership skill set that another NCO may obtain managing large numbers of troops and their associated issues. Some believe that the technical ranks should be reinstated to differentiate the technician from the leader. Others espouse the belief that the expectations of leadership should not be lowered because an NCO is not in an environment that requires him/her to exercise

authority on a regular basis. Should a technician be paid at the same rate as a leader yet not be held responsible as in the case of a sergeant and a SPC-5?

Lastly, and most significantly, the general Army population demographic profile has changed drastically over time. Despite popular opinion that the military is competing with establishments such as McDonald's for recruits, it is facing more competition from colleges and universities for enlisted and officer personnel. Enlisted troops are significantly more likely to have a high school education than their civilian peers. Only 1.4 percent of enlisted recruits in 2007 had not graduated from high school or completed a high school equivalency degree, compared to 20.8 percent of the total population of men ages 18 to 24. America's soldiers are less likely than civilians to be high school dropouts. Enlisted soldiers are more likely to have a high school education than their nonmilitary counterparts. Over 98 percent of enlisted recruits in 2007 had graduated from high school or completed a GED, in comparison to 20.8 percent of the total population of men ages 18 to 24. America's soldiers are much more likely than civilians to be high school graduates. One of the more compelling forces affecting military enlistment is the interest in future college attendance. A major motivation for younger people to enlist is the anticipation of earning educational benefits to use during service or upon exiting the military (Watkins, 2008).

As a microcosm of the American population the military has seen a general increase in the education level of its population just as in the general population. Because of the selection processes for selection for military service the education level for both enlisted and officers exceeds that of the general population for certain age groups.

Education now more than ever plays a more important role in the evaluation of an NCO for promotion. Advanced education is widely believed to help to develop skills in reasoning, tolerance, reflection, and communication. Other skills that are developed are conflict resolution and an increased ability to solve crises that come up in the course of a personal or professional life. A college education will also help to understand other people's viewpoints. Another benefit of a college education is the access to differing cultures and personal backgrounds. Gaining the awareness that proximity to diversity affords is another justification for a higher education. Increased education and the knowledge gained from it can lead to a broader world view and understanding of people and situations. These skills are ever more critical for a leader in today's diverse society and the Army (McGuire, N.D.).

These skills are ever more critical in the military as decentralized leadership techniques require lower levels of leadership deal with increasingly complex situations. These leaders are also required to act more autonomously and to make informed judgments that affect life and death. Decentralized authority has also become more prevalent in civilian management because it allows for increased decision making ability at lower levels, increasing efficiency and flexibility.

The military has at times been visionary in its introduction of new concepts and at times reluctant to change. Again, there appears to be a fear within the NCO leadership that increasing the decision making authority of a subordinate somehow diminishes the authority of the superior. While increased subordinate authority can be beneficial in many circumstances, there is the distinct possibility that the trusted subordinate will make a critical mistake at the wrong time. Historically, the US military has not at all been

unsuccessful. Just as with most successful organizations, the temptation to leave things as they are is great. Why fix something that is not broken? Like most institutions, the military is reluctant to change and any major shakeup in its way of doing things is perceived as heresy. This reluctance extends to the acceptance of a generally more educated enlisted soldier as well as

### **Summary**

The role of the NCO is fundamentally the same as it was at the time of the American Revolution. It has also expanded to include roles and duties that were never thought of in the past. Despite resistance within and without, the Army and the roles of NCOs have changed significantly. Society, professionalism, and technology have had a great influence on the Army NCO. All of these factors have had a positive effect on the NCO. They allow the NCO to accomplish more and with less pain than before. The results of the volunteer force in actual combat bears this out. The NCO has to change with his/her ever changing environment in order to be effective and relevant in today's Army.

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