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Abstract

The NCO (Noncommissioned Officer) has had a direct effect on the progress of the United States Army. Over the years the roll of the NCO has evolved to take on greater responsibilities as leaders and trainers. Some would argue that while the change has been mostly positive NCOs are at times empowered too much and that some NCOs are loosing touch with their soldiers.

As early as 1609 the stage was being set for what would become the most professional and competent NCO Corps in the world. NCOs were charged with generating and maintaining guard rosters in order to secure establishments and perimeters. Even the earliest of NCOs realized the importance of serving directly with their men they would insert themselves into the guard roster and serve along side their soldiers. NCOs during this time period were extremely harsh when dealing with their soldiers. Lack of formal education and people skills were limiting their abilities. At the time, the military establishment did not recognize it; as with every lesson learned and every process that would be made better it would take many years for the corps to evolve. At that time in history the NCO was considered not much more than his subordinates he supervised by the officer corps. The NCO was expected to do as he was told and not inject much thought into it. The officer was considered the complete authority with respect to task and tasking that required intellectual ability to figure out. Over the years this thought process would prove to be extremely ineffective. The military would come to realize that the formal education of its NCO would become a fundamental prerequisite for professional soldiers in order to keep up with technology and the continued rise in the education levels of its subordinate ranks.

As the army turned the century into the 1700s the NCO Corps would not have changed a whole lot. They would be locked into the regiment that they had initially enlisted in and could not transfer to other units. This

could have a perceived positive effect for the army. In reality the only person or element that would benefit from this policy would be the commander of the unit the NCO was currently assigned to he would always have the most qualified NCO for running his soldiers in his unit, which was true. This policy would have very negative effects on the army as an institution. By not allowing competent soldiers to transfer and become good at other jobs and leadership challenges it was keeping subordinate soldiers in a unit at one level of proficiency. The army was not developing future leaders and supervisors in an effective and efficient manor. The concept of spreading the wisdom throughout the force was a foreign idea. The officers were unwittingly contributing to the inevitable failing of the army if this policy did not change.

As the century turned again to the 1800s the NCO would find himself evolved into a small unit leader, he was no longer just the mouth piece for the officer he would be working in a decentralized fashion leading patrols for extended periods of time. This century would mark some significant changes in NCOs roll. The problem though, he would digress a little from a decentralized leader to a controller of linear formations which would prove not to be a very good tactic. The publishing of a new book “Rules and Regulations for the Field Exercise and the Maneuver Infantry” by Brig General Winfield Scott would make the NCO the focal point on the battle field. He would control formations and make sure the line was held during offensive and defensive maneuvers. This new assignment and

responsibility would still fall short of exploiting the true potential of the NCO. It is easy now to see that NCO would form the core of a unit and his abilities would be equaled to that of his commanding officer in the future.

By the turn of this century to the 19th the NCO was well on his way to proving his total worth. He was beginning to take a paternal approach to his soldiers, this could have a positive or negative effect depending on how he would be able to balance his authority with a more eclectic or participative way of getting things done. Some would argue that authority is the absolute way to go, however, this technique would require only management not leadership. This failed concept by officers in the past is what had kept their units operating at minimum potential. The acceptance of risk in the area of delegation could act as a leadership force multiplier within a unit if it were implemented correctly. Not only could the NCO represent his commander from a position of authority, but the commander would be concurrently developing subordinate leaders at varying levels within his unit. In the future this would allow him to support transfers of his personnel to other units for career enhancement while maintaining leaders he had personally trained.

In 1918 formal training for NCOs in the Army Expeditionary Forces was established. Formal education of NCOs would no doubt bother some officers. Education of enlisted personnel meant officers would always have to be on their game. Having total influence over educated soldiers would require a competence that could not be faked. On the other hand

over barren NCOs would have to understand that not only formal classroom education could earn them the respect and confidence from the officers and the men they would need to perform their duties. They would again have to figure out how to gel the paternal approach, the delegation of authority, the ability to operate decentralized and the new education into one package to achieve maximum results. As the years keep going by the NCO continually exhibits his capacity to learn and evolve with changing times.

Up until this time the NCO was basically a full time company man. This had its advantages and disadvantages. The NCOIC would stay in the barracks or tents with his men his total existence revolved around them. This would always guarantee continuity and consistent communications but left little time for him to have a family or personal time. This also mitigated his ability to develop subordinates who could handle things in his absence. One true mark of a leader and influencer can be gauged by what happens in his absence.

In 1947 the first NCO Academy was established. It would still fall short of having the ability to train and mentor enlisted soldiers. Officers were still having trouble with the concept of releasing their NCOs from what they considered more important responsibilities to attend school. Again they were taking care of themselves and their unit but contributing to the overall problem in the army. This position taken by army officers was proving in my view, that they were more of a liability to the future of

the army than the enlisted man. Even with all the obstacles and hurdles between the NCO and his education he continued to perform magnificently. It seemed that the army would only put emphasis on the NCO Corps during times of emergency they were failing to see that an educated and trained NCO would contribute greatly in peace time to the readiness of the unit when the next emergency appeared.

As the Korean and the Vietnam War came upon us the NCO was playing a very significant roll now. They were training soldiers and leading them in combat. NCOs were basically acting commanders operating in a decentralized fashion.

As in the past NCOs today can be considered the primary communicator to the troops. They no longer use the colors rather direct written and verbal communication. This has mostly positive effects, however the NCO can take on a command presence that sends the wrong message, i.e. I'm in charge and make all the decisions. This can confuse younger soldiers. Care has to be taken that the officer and the NCO remain united and the NCO is actually carrying out his commander's intent with the troops. There should never be any confusion about who is actually in charge and completely responsible for outcomes. Officers have to make them selves visible to soldiers so the troops understand they are the ones responsible for the mission but the NCO is getting the job done.

As we keep moving through history we find that other ranks were added to the NCO Corps. When the E7 rank was added that NCO

basically became the liaison between his platoon and the company. This addition give the 1SG more flexibility and provided him with a go to guy for each platoon. Again every positive action taken can have a negative effect if one does not pay attention to small details. Every time we put a liaison in between us and who ever we are communicating with we take the risk of loosing the power of influence gained by being present and speaking directly to our target audience. We should use a liaison as a time multiplier in order to give us more freedom of movement and provide continuity between us and our soldiers; however, there will never be a replacement for on the ground on the scene presence when we wish to communicate with people.

As new specialties were added to the MTOE (modified table of organization and equipment) NCOs became disgruntled because the specialist were making as much money as they were this was a problem because the NCO had grater responsibilities than the technical specialist. This addition of technical expertise helped the army but it was also overlooking one important consideration. The army while trying to do good was taking emphasis away from a very important factor with respect to its NCO Corps. NCOs were leaders and responsible for troops due to their exhibited leadership ability, maturity and experience. By promoting technical specialist to sergeants the army was associating rank with technical ability not leadership ability. Technical specialist should be compensated for their knowledge but we should always associate

advancement to NCO with leadership and maturity those are the two qualities that cant be taught in a classroom they have to be developed over time. Technical skills can be taught at AIT (Advanced Individual Training) or some other venue.

Today's NCOs are compensated well for their service and treated like the true professionals they are. The NCOs who decide to make the United States Army a career are true selfless servants to their country and soldiers. They are proving they are not in it just for the money. Most NCOs who have spent six or more years in the army could move on to a more profitable career in the civilian sector but they choose to stay. Like the first NCOs who came before us and blazed the path we now travel there is no doubt we are blazing the trail for the next generation of selfless servants.

References

Time Honored Professionals. The NCO Corps Since 1775. Primary Source

