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Mentorship as a Professional Development Tool

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## Introduction

Soldiers look to us for guidance and mentorship. We are problem solvers and decision makers. Purpose, direction and motivation are the strategies we use as good leaders. We must always assume our responsibilities and enforce our authority. Soldiers are the Army's number one resource and we have a responsibility and obligation to keep them informed, trained, disciplined, and safe. Today's Soldiers are tomorrow's leaders and if we do not lead them properly, their shortcomings as Soldiers are our failures as leaders.

With our current operational tempo and numerous deployments, our Army is stretched thin like never before. As we continue to fight our nation's war, we as leaders must not forget to make time to mentor and pass on knowledge to our young Soldiers and future leaders. Even though mentorship can be time consuming, it should remain a critical tool in the development of our Soldiers. The ability to pass on experience and lessons learned will ensure we develop strong leaders for the future of our Army.

## Mentorship Defined

There are many definitions of mentorship and many forms throughout all of society. Mentorship typically takes place between two individuals, a mentor and one receiving the mentoring. A mentor has experience, a willingness to share knowledge, and a passion to preserve the future through lessons learned. The individual receiving the mentorship must be receptive and open to instruction. Trust and respect between the two goes along way in the mentoring process. We will discuss mentorship and how it specifically applies to our Army and developing our Soldiers. Taking time to mentor, teach, and train has many benefits and is critical to developing strong leaders for the future of our Army.

## Benefits of Mentorship

There are countless benefits associated with mentoring. Mentoring allows experienced leaders to pass on knowledge and enables our young Soldiers to learn from previous success and failure. Mentorship provides an outlet to pass on lessons learned and aids tremendously in the development of strong leaders for future success.

### *Developing Strong Leaders*

Strengthening our Army, one Soldier at a time, begins with mentorship. Taking the time to teach and train our young leaders will guarantee our Army remains the fighting force it is today. Mentorship can be time consuming and actually is a never ending process, but one of critical importance. With our nation at war, our Soldiers enter into our Army eager to learn and knowing full well of the likelihood they will deploy to the Middle East. We as leaders do a tremendous job of preparing our Soldiers and teaching them required skills for survival in combat. We must also mentor and train them to eventually lead the Soldiers of the future. We must invest time in our Soldiers to ensure our Army remains a strong and capable force. As leaders, we are a product of the leadership we received or failed to receive as young Soldiers. An organization that falls apart when its experience and leadership departs is a failed organization. We owe it to our Soldiers and Army to develop strong leaders by passing on lessons learned.

### *Wisdom Passed on Through Lessons Learned*

We stress continuity books in the work place as a means of ensuring we maintain a steady flow of production. Mentorship is a vital extension of this thought process. Although mentorship takes on many forms, passing on lessons learned may be the most important element in the process. The ability to teach and instruct by applying real-world applications enables

Soldiers to draw on our experience and hopefully helps them avoid potential mistakes. The Army truly understands the importance and necessity of mentorship and passing on lessons learned at every stage of development. We routinely conduct after action reviews during our daily operations to help us become more efficient. Numerous reports on lessons learned from Iraq have been written to assist our Soldiers while performing their operational mission. In addition to these examples of passing on wisdom through lessons learned, our Army has put into place mentorship programs to facilitate the learning process.

### Army Mentorship Programs

Understanding the importance of mentorship, the Army established numerous on-line programs. Warrant Officer mentorship, Officer mentorship, NCO Net, and even motor cycle mentorship are but a few of the mentorship programs established to aid in the development of leaders. Each program is designed to help leaders maximize their potential through information flow. NCO net specifically provides members the ability to interact with one another through messaging, chat rooms, or simply posting information to assist others through lessons learned. Posted information is maintained in a library for quick reference and enhances a leader's ability to accomplish the mission. All the established mentorship programs perform generally the same function albeit focused on their specific needs or preferred audience. These programs have accomplished the desired results by allowing information flow through strength in numbers. The ease and accessibility with which a leader has to one of these sights has streamlined the learning process, but potentially could have a negative effect on the development of our leaders.

### Drawbacks of Mentorship Programs

On-line mentorship programs allow others to share experiences throughout the entire Army with the click of a button. If a leader encounters a dilemma, he or she can quickly call on experiences posted on-line from anyone who has lived the same scenario. No doubt information flow has reached new heights with increased technology, but this could potentially cause leaders to become too reliant on others. Leaders who do not develop their own problem solving skills will always be reliant on the experiences and decisions of others.

#### *Reliant on Others Experiences*

Leaders, who rely completely on others to make a decision, will eventually become ineffective as a leader; by definition, leaders lead. Leaders make decisions that will affect the lives of others. Failure at times in the decision making process is critical for growth as a leader. A leader must have personal experiences to draw from. If an individual has never learned how to make a decision, fail in the process, re-group and make a new decision, the necessary growth process of a leader does not take place. To rely completely on others for decisions, stunts individual thoughts, growth as a leader, and stops the learning process.

#### *Stunts individual thoughts and growth*

Relying completely on the lessons learned of others will stunt individual thoughts and growth as a leader. Leaders who have no personal experience to draw from become reliant on the lessons learned of others. Unable to think for themselves, these individuals fail to mature as a leader and are unable to make a necessary decision in the heat of battle. The Army as an institution depends on leaders making informed decisions.

### Conclusion

Helping our Soldiers better themselves through our success and failures as leaders is the essence of mentorship. Mentorship is a critical tool needed for the professional and personal development of our Soldiers. Regardless of our current operational pace, we must make time for mentoring our young Soldiers. Our Army relies on continuity between our experienced Soldiers and those who will eventually lead the Army of the future. Mentorship ensures the necessary continuity remains intact.