**Research Report 2034**


# Snapshot of Early Noncommissioned Officer Leadership Transition Experiences in the U.S. Army



**Larry W. Golba**
U.S. Army Research Institute



**October 2021**

**United States Army Research Institute
for the Behavioral and Social Sciences**

U.S. Army Research Institute
for the Behavioral and Social Sciences

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**14. ABSTRACT**
The purpose of this research was to identify the challenges encountered by enlisted Soldiers in the U.S. Army as they transition into leadership roles.  A sample of 49 Soldiers (private first class to first sergeant) from a Forces Command installation participated in focus groups designed to gather first-hand accounts during an umbrella week data collection in August 2018.  The Army Leadership Requirements model was used as a framework for examining the issues raised during this project in order to facilitate more direct translation of the research into existing Army leader development concepts.  The primary finding of this research was that, despite a robust leader development system in the Army, the majority of these Soldiers encountered significant difficulties upon assuming a leadership position for the first time.  While the sample size in this effort is small, the key points identified in this research converge with other sources of information.  Based on the findings of this preliminary research, in-depth examination of the issues unique to the transition process of enlisted Soldiers as they transition into noncommissioned officers within the Army is warranted.

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**Brian T. Crabb, Chief**


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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research Requirement:

The current research identified common challenges faced by junior enlisted Soldiers as they transition into their initial leadership roles. Noncommissioned officers (NCO) play an integral role in ensuring the Army's capability to accomplish daily and larger mission sets. Recent reports have indicated that the Army has a distinct need for more junior NCOs in first-line supervisory billets (Department of the Army 2017, Department of the Army, 2018a). However, the pressure to fill these positions has also lead to a situation in which Soldiers may be promoted before they are fully equipped to handle the full range of duties and responsibilities inherent in leadership roles. The primary goal of this project was to collect first-hand accounts from junior enlisted Soldiers and junior NCOs in order to empirically derive themes from their direct experiences in their own transition into leadership positions as well as their observed experience of this transition in others.

Procedure:

A sample of 49 Soldiers, ranging from private first class (PFC) to first sergeant (1SG), from one Army Forces Command installation participated in focus groups during umbrella week data collections in August 2018. Contemporaneous notes from these sessions were then analyzed for general themes and observations. Concurrent to data collection, a literature review was conducted that examined Army doctrine related to leader development and Army leadership.

Findings:

Two primary take away messages emerged from this preliminary work on role transition for junior enlisted Soldiers. First, the Army appears to have a solid foundation of educational and developmental materials to facilitate the necessary buildup of the initial level of the NCO Corps. The leadership development resources and materials for NCOs are grounded in generational Army knowledge and are consistent with predominant academic principles of leader development. However, the second major point is that the vast majority of junior leaders do not seem to be benefitting from those resources as early as would be ideal. The crux of that shortfall appears to be tied to meaningful and consistent early leadership experiences. Army doctrine spells out the importance of these experiences, but the current Army culture does not appear to allow these new leaders the requisite experiences until they are already in a leadership role. This lack of direct formative experience delays the acquisition and development of many of the key attributes and competencies found in the Army Leadership Requirement model, leaving room for potential missteps and inefficiency. An additional factor complicating the development of junior NCOs is that there appears to be some level of reticence from these new enlisted leaders to engage in development opportunities that do arise. The reasons cited relate to either fear of failure, potential consequences for mistakes, or a lack of confidence to act decisively. As the

Army moves toward increasingly independent functioning at all levels, it is imperative that all leaders possess these qualities before they move into leadership roles.

Utilization and Dissemination of Findings:

The results of this research will be used by the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences to develop further research which will examine the challenges encountered by new enlisted leaders within the Army. The results of this line of research will then be used to develop tools and recommendations to improve the junior enlisted leader transition process.

SNAPSHOT OF EARLY NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER LEADERSHIP TRANSITION
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**Snapshot of Early Noncommissioned Officer Leadership Transition Experiences in the U.S. Army**

Following an era of prolonged warfighting and subsequent draw-down, the U.S. Army is currently regenerating and rebuilding the force. This is occurring simultaneously with a fundamental re-focusing of the Army toward a posture of modernization and preparation for competition with near-peer nation-state actors (Department of the Army, 2018b). In order to successfully resolve this transitional phase and position itself for success in the future operating environment, the Army will require leaders capable of handling complexity and uncertainty (United States Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2018). The ever-increasing speed of information and kinetic assets will require leaders at all levels to decide and act in short windows of opportunity to exploit time-sensitive vulnerabilities in enemy formations.

**Army Leader Development.** Throughout the past several years formal, informal, and anecdotal evidence has pointed to a number of personnel challenges and disruptions across the formation. Official Army sources, such as the Army's report "Generating Health and Discipline in the Force: Ahead of the Strategic Reset" (Department of the U.S. Army, 2012a), have noted that from the tail-end of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan the Army has been facing a number of issues within its ranks including mental health (such as post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide), dissolution of discipline, and criminal behavior. Many of these difficulties have been linked, at least in part, to the demands of maintaining a high operational tempo and exposure to combat. There is ample evidence that these factors have had a great impact on both previously and currently serving members of the military. However, the 2012 report and a previous report from 2010 (Department of the U.S. Army, 2010) also note some specific issues related to lost leadership experience and skills for operating in environments outside of combat, particularly in garrison. This lack of experience and skills for leading during long, often monotonous, periods of stability at a home station is currently being felt by Soldiers as their leaders regain or learn these skills.

Many of the leaders in the Army today have not known, at least until recently, what Army life was like outside of frenetic cycles of preparation to deployment to recovery repeated continuously through the early part of this century. Even for the leaders who had previous contact with prolonged garrison stays, it had been so long since they had those experiences that finer points of leading while at their home station had atrophied over time. They are now collectively learning how to lead in garrison as they go. While Soldiers entering the Army today may not experience continuous combat deployment cycles, the leaders from whom they are learning and modeling their behavior largely still have that experiential frame of reference. The difficulties that have resulted from this learning process, combined with the aftermath of and recovery from those iterative combat cycles, have had a profound impact on the Soldiers across the force.

The Army devotes significant resources to leader development in order to prepare leaders for the roles and responsibilities they will face in positions of authority. While many aspects of leader development within the Army are generally applicable to all leaders, there are also significant differences to consider, in particular the difference inherent between

noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and commissioned officers. Most of the leadership research conducted with Army samples has focused on commissioned officers and command considerations. The nature and type of leadership employed by commissioned officers is necessarily distinct from that employed by enlisted leaders in many respects. This report is focused solely on enlisted leadership. More specifically it is focused on the challenges faced during the critical period in which a junior enlisted Soldier transitions into a leadership role and joins the NCO Corps. From this point forward in this report, references to "leader" or "leadership" are used to refer solely to the enlisted realm of these terms, unless otherwise specified.

The Army's current paradigm of leader development encompasses three major domains of learning: operational, institutional and self-development (see Figure 1, Department of the Army, 2018c). This model's three aspects (training, education and experience) are incorporated across all three spheres to facilitate well-rounded learning and preparation of NCOs. Each phase of development builds on the competencies of the previous phases while also developing new competencies to meet the demands of the various leadership positions assumed across a career.

**Figure 1**

Army leader development model from Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA-PAM) 600-25. This model shows the interconnected nature of the three domains of Army leader development: Operational, Institutional, and Self-development.
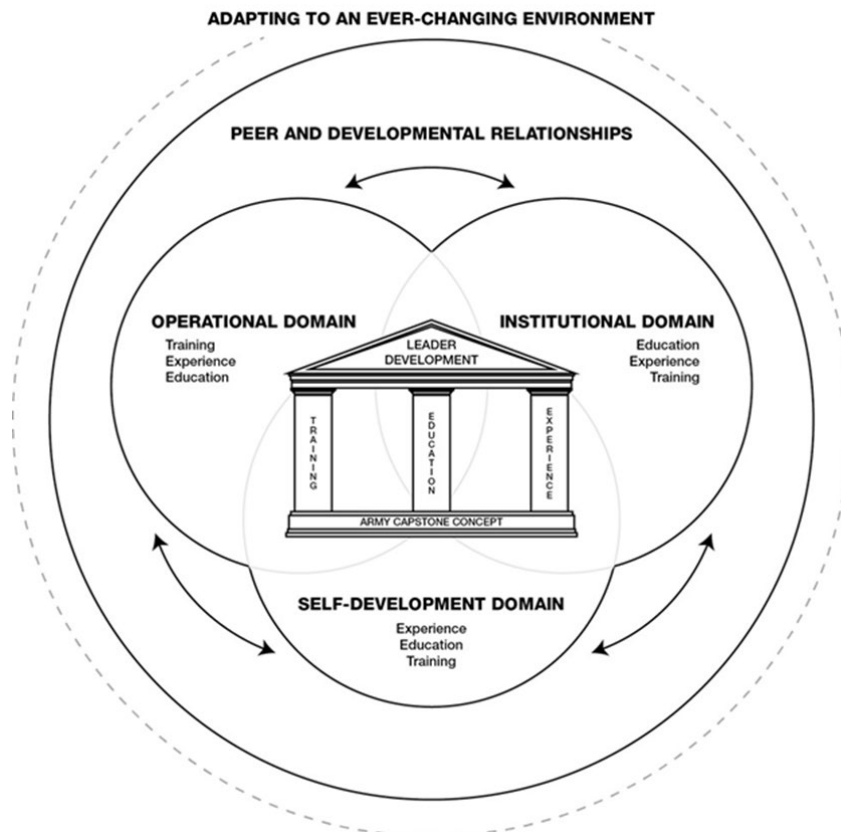
The Army system for developing NCOs has been overhauled many times throughout its existence to meet changing operational requirements. During these iterative improvements, advances in leadership development, as well as learning and education, have been leveraged. The NCO 4x6 model (see Figure 2) illustrates the specific roles and learning areas which are foundational to the Army's NCO leader development model (Department of the Army, 2018c).

**Figure 2**

NCO 4x6 model from DA-PAM 600-25, included to show the various aspects of enlisted leadership in the Army. This model depicts the diverse and interconnected nature of the domains required to be a successful enlisted leader in the U.S. Army.
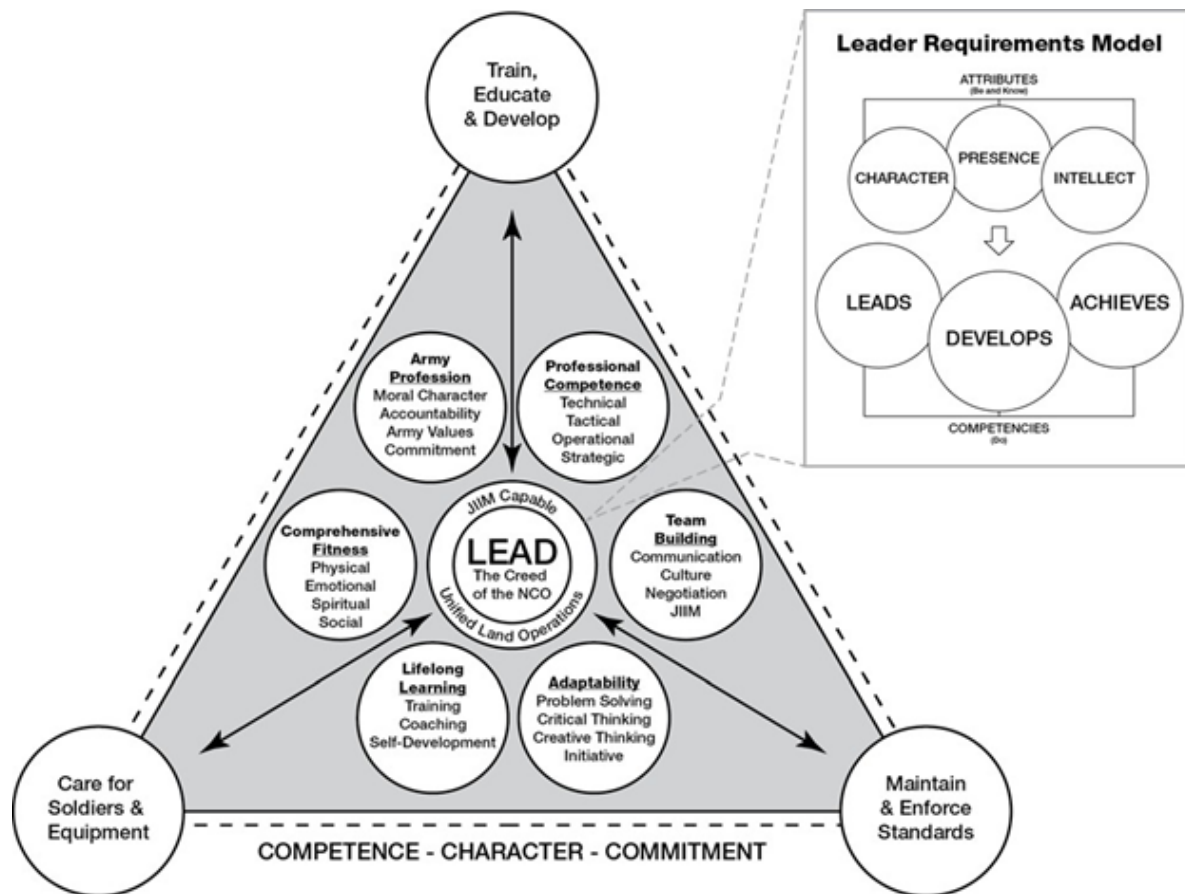


The Army needs to have effective junior NCOs in place to provide direct leadership and perform the necessary leading, training, caring, and disciplinary functions required to ensure that the enlisted force is prepared and able to meet mission requirements (e.g., Wenger, O'Connell, Constant, & Lohn, 2018; Department of the Army, 2018b). However, NCO billets have been difficult to keep consistently filled with Soldiers of requisite rank, particularly at the junior NCO levels. This shortfall had been prevalent to such a critical level that a policy directive on junior NCO promotions directly targeted those shortfalls (Department of the Army, 2017). The directive essentially lessened the influence of local command teams over the pacing of promotion eligibility. This change pushed all Soldiers to move toward promotion and stand for

promotion boards once they hit primary zone eligibility, unless there was a documented reason to hold them back, whether the Soldiers wanted to pursue promotion or not. There are likely some direct benefits to a blanket approach; the most obvious is an increased flow of Soldiers to the ranks of sergeant and staff sergeant. However, this policy change may also have some unintended, but foreseeable, consequences. The most prominent consequence was that by speeding up promotions to fill vacancies, numerous Soldiers in this wave of promotions were reportedly under-prepared for the duties and responsibilities of leadership. Previous research (Wenger, O'Connell, Constant, & Lohn, 2018) has noted that the Army generally has not been adept at identifying and fostering enlisted Soldiers who show leadership potential.

**Junior Enlisted Leadership Transition**

It is important to note that the transition point from junior enlisted team member to leader is largely unique within the military and as such requires some particular focus to address inherent challenges within this fundamental shift of role and identity. The change from follower to leader is very distinct. The standards for conduct apply to all NCOs from the SMA to the most recently promoted sergeant; there is no grace period and the new NCO is expected to immediately uphold those standards. However, most dimensions of human behavior are not easily changeable, significant behavior change typically requires time and practice to take hold.

Another significant consideration is the developmental period during which the transition into leadership roles often occurs. For many Soldiers this transition occurs in their early 20s. This developmental phase is typically a time of identity and social development characterized by individual exploration which often involves internal and external conflict. While many in their age group are engaged in post-secondary educational institutions or entry level jobs, Soldiers are becoming leaders. Direct leadership positions in the Army, which are decidedly higher pressure and higher risk than virtually any civilian vocation for this age group, are critical to the Army's functioning. Adding leadership responsibilities on top of the developmental considerations inherent during this developmental period can create significant stress and the potential for far-reaching consequences if the new leader makes critical errors. New NCOs must navigate this period without the benefit of years of experience, both in work and in life, to guide their decision making in difficult situations. Equipping Soldiers with the tools and strategies to successfully negotiate this difficult phase, until they have had more time build up a bank of experience and wisdom, would be beneficial to the Army's future success.

The concept for this project was formed from the aggregated first-hand accounts of the concerns and difficulties previously communicated by NCOs about the current state of the Army's NCO Corps. While this is a multifaceted issue, empirical inquiry into the early leadership experiences of junior NCOs would likely produce useful information to address a portion of the issue. In particular, studying the challenges new NCOs face, and strategies they use to navigate them, in time period leading up to and shortly after their promotion to sergeant could yield information that can be disseminated across the force to aid others' transition into leadership roles. The present effort is concentrated on gathering information on the process of this transition and its impact on the Soldiers as they move through this phase. The results and discussion in this report will be presented using the six domains of the Army Leadership Requirements Model (see Figure 3; Department of the Army, 2019) in order to offer a common

frame of reference for the findings and to facilitate direct translation of the research findings to relevant Army requirements. The major objectives of this project were to: gather information from prospective and newly promoted NCOs about their experiences with leader development, identify leadership challenges for enlisted Soldiers as they transition into early leadership roles, and identify successful strategies and approaches to successfully navigating the challenges in this transition.

**Figure 3**

Army leadership requirements model as presented in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22. This model identifies the primary leadership attributes (character, presence, and intellect) and primary competencies (leads, develops, and achieves) required of Army leaders along with supporting sub-competencies for each. Encircling the attributes and competencies are the words BE (Character and Presence), KNOW (Intellect), and DO (Leads, Develops and Achieves) to show where all of these components fit within that paradigm.
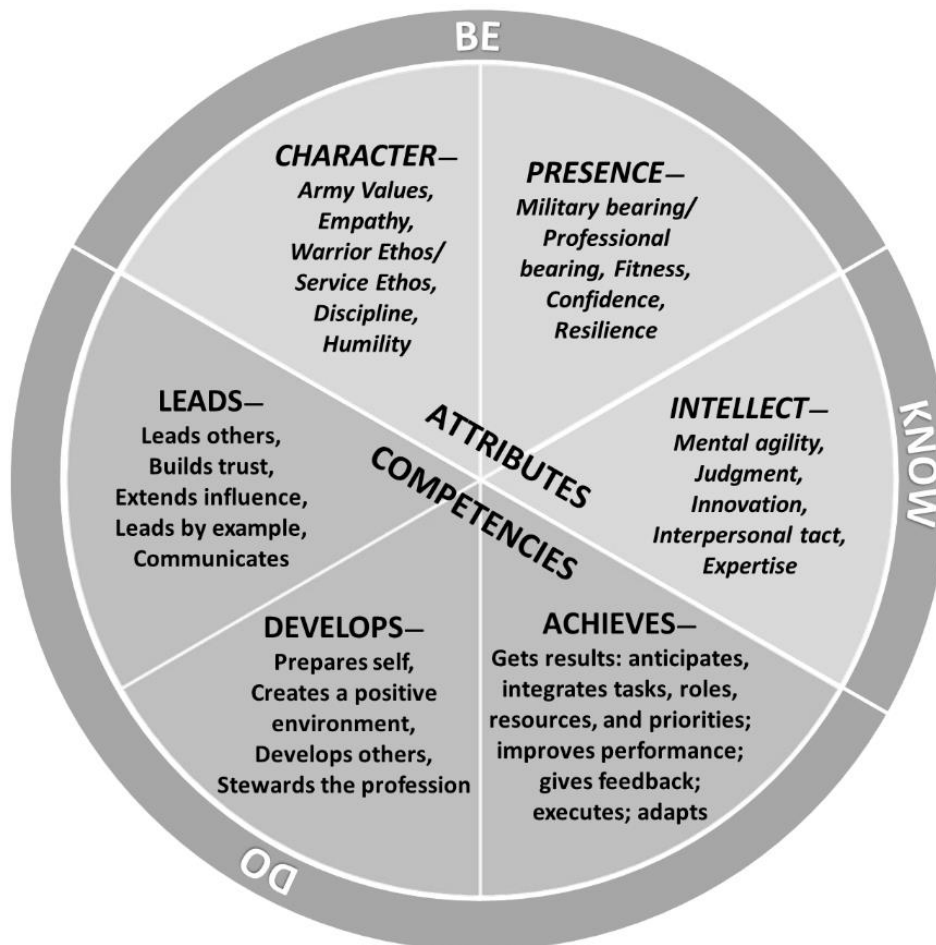
## Method

### Participants

The Soldiers participating in this project were all assigned to one Army Forces Command installation in the continental United States. Participants were provided through taskings coordinated by local operations staff. All of the tasked Soldiers were provided a project summary prior to participation. After reading this and receiving a short briefing by the researcher, all but one Soldier volunteered to participate in the research. One Soldier declined to fill out the demographic form, but did participate in the discussion.

The primary sample was comprised of 47 enlisted personnel, ranging in rank from private first class to staff sergeant. Soldiers participated in one of 10 focus groups of 2-7 Soldiers, depending on the number that reported for the session (sessions were requested to have six participants each). The NCOs and junior enlisted Soldiers were in separate sessions. A supplementary sample of three first sergeants was included to provide a longer term perspective on the junior NCO transition process. Senior NCOs participated in one of two focus groups/interviews.

### Materials

This project utilized a semi-structured focus group protocol (see Appendix A) developed specifically for this project to facilitate information gathering about the research objectives. The protocol contained a number of probe questions covering a wide-range of pertinent topics including: expectations for leadership roles, preparation for leadership roles, mentoring, leader identity, and problem solving. A short demographics sheet was also developed to gather some additional contextual information about the participants. No identifying information was gathered in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of participants. As this was conceived as a prelude to and proof of concept for a larger effort, it was not vital to the project to gather highly detailed demographic information about the participants.

### Procedures

The researcher provided an introductory briefing to each group about the nature of the information being gathered. The procedure was fairly simple, Soldiers were largely given an opportunity to voice any relevant experiences, anecdotes, or concerns related to the research topic. While the discussions were initially open-ended, the facilitator would use the protocol to introduce topics and ask questions to guide the discussion toward areas most relevant to the research objectives.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

|  |  | N* | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Current Rank | PFC through SPC/CPL: | 23 | 46.9 |
|  | SGT: | 22 | 44.9 |
|  | SSG: | 1 | 2 |
|  | SFC and above: | 3 | 6.1 |
| Years of Service | 0-2: | 3 | 6.1 |
|  | 2-5: | 31 | 63.3 |
|  | 6-10: | 10 | 20.4 |
|  | 11+: | 5 | 10.2 |
| Deployed** | Yes, combat: | 29 | 59.2 |
|  | Yes, non-combat: | 26 | 53.1 |
|  | No: | 0 | 0 |
| Current Duty Position | Team leader: | 21 | 42.9 |
|  | Squad leader: | 7 | 14.3 |
|  | Platoon sergeant: | 1 | 2 |
|  | First sergeant: | 3 | 6.1 |
|  | Other: | 17 | 34.7 |
| Function | Combat Arms: | 26 | 53.1 |
|  | Combat Support: | 4 | 8.2 |
|  | Support Services: | 19 | 38.8 |

*Notes.* PFC: private first class, SPC: Specialist, CPL: Corporal, SGT: sergeant, SSG: staff sergeant, SFC: sergeant first class
* One Soldier participated in the discussion, but declined filling out the demographic sheet. Summary statistics in this table are based on the completed demographic sheets.
** Some Soldiers reported both types of deployments

The Results section includes the findings from a content analysis of contemporaneous notes from the focus groups. The sessions were neither recorded nor transcribed, however, adeptly worded direct quotes or those that succinctly captured the gist of the discussion on a topic were preserved along with the more general notes of the exchanges in the sessions. The notes were first examined for frequently occurring themes and topics of discussion. After establishing these general themes, the notes were re-examined to determine relative intensity of the discussion of these topics, determine direction(s) of the sentiment on each topic area, and establish boundaries for the topics. These major themes were sorted into the supporting elements within each domain of the Army Leadership Requirement Model (see Figure 3).

In order to limit priming effects and responses of "book answers" from participants, the questions and prompts within the sessions were not couched in the Army Leadership Requirement model. As such, there was not always direct congruence between the responses in the focus groups to these content areas. However, even without explicit cues, much of the content of the discussions directly revolved around the domains and sub-domains of this model. The results are presented in the framework of the model with the addition of selected salient themes that are not directly addressed in the model.

# Results

## Attributes

### Character.

**Army Values.**  The Army Values were mentioned as a whole at points during the discussions and a number of the individual values came up very frequently throughout the sessions.  The general sense was that the Soldiers were keenly aware of these values and for the most part attempted to live them.  However, they also noted encountering values-related conflicts at times.  One frequently mentioned instance of this was in the realm of integrity.  Many times throughout the sessions, participants noted that they were under significant pressure to report untrue statuses of manning, equipment, or both.  They recognized the right thing to do (report the actual status) but often were overridden by higher echelons or met consequences for not reporting "all green" statuses.

Respect was another popular value discussed by these groups.   Junior NCOs often reported not feeling respected by senior leaders/NCOs or by subordinates.  A telling quote from one NCO was that "E5 is the new private," starkly illustrating their perceived status within the unit.  In units where this was the norm, the NCOs reported that obtaining and maintaining respect from their subordinates was very challenging.  Seniors NCOs stated that because the junior enlisted Soldiers knew the command would often not back first line supervisors on disciplinary actions, the Soldiers largely did what they wanted and open disrespect was not uncommon.  This was not the case in other units where there was concordance between the levels of leadership within the unit.  In units with senior leaders who were supportive of junior leaders, respect and the other Army Values were reportedly displayed to a high degree.

**Empathy.**  Empathy was a very contentious subject.  The majority of participants recognized the importance of empathy in leading Soldiers.  However, the actual occurrence of empathy within their units was variable.  Most reported that they did not feel that their command was empathic toward their and their families' needs, which had a noticeably negative impact on morale.  However, they also noted that at lower levels, they were generally able to build and maintain empathy.  They also frequently voiced ideas about how they were working to improve empathy within their small units.  By far, the most common statement across all focus groups was the maxim "know your Soldiers."  NCOs reported that the primary means by which they demonstrated empathy was through genuine attempts to get to know their Soldiers, understand their life circumstances, and develop a connection with each Soldier as an individual.

**Warrior Ethos/Service Ethos.**  Soldiers demonstrated solid understanding of the Warrior Ethos.  They referenced volunteering to join the Army during wartime and knowing what they were "getting into," a high likelihood that would be deployed to combat theaters.  Overall this seemed to be a common rallying point for the Soldiers where, despite the other difficulties they reported, they could focus on the mission at hand.  Some felt this was taken to extremes at times and interfered with other aspects of life, particularly in relation to frequent and prolonged field exercises as well as in the all-to-frequent late-in-the-day taskings that tended to keep Soldiers at work beyond standard duty hours.  These extended work days took a toll on the

Soldiers in many ways, from lack of time to rest, relax, or de-stress, to interruption of time with family or friends.

**Discipline.** This topic was brought up in virtually every session and frequently was reported to be a major source of disappointment. Many of the participants voiced their concerns over the impact that lack of discipline was having on readiness and trust in their units. Many of the NCOs reported that they were discouraged from disciplining Soldiers and enforcing standards, either overtly or by implication due to superiors not backing up their attempts to enforce standards. Participants noted that once it became known that standards were not being enforced, it tended to sap the morale and enthusiasm of not only that unit, but could even spread to adjacent units. This phenomenon was reported at the platoon and company level. Other participants perceived a situation in which the higher headquarters (HQ) was seen as the source for the neglect of standards, which directly affected the subordinate units.

*Presence.*

**Military and Professional Bearing.** The most prevailing sense for this topic was that military bearing has been eroding over the last several years. The NCOs and Soldiers could describe what military bearing is and why it is important, but they also recognized that it is inconsistently displayed in the Army today. Virtually all participants reported that they had observed at least one good exemplar for military and professional bearing, but not always within their direct chain. They could also readily identify leaders who did not display this trait. Several of the junior leaders also reported some difficulty with the pressure of having to maintain their bearing at all times. Many of them noted that once you were in a leadership position "all eyes are on you" and having to be "on" at all times was a difficult adjustment, particularly at the beginning.

**Fitness.** The value of fitness was clearly expressed in these groups. More overt emphasis was placed on physical fitness, but mental fitness was also seen as important. Leading from the front during physical training or having a high score on the Army Physical Fitness Test were offered as common examples of how leaders can set the standard for fitness. There was some concern over the stigma attached to admitting to or receiving care for mental health issues, along with the possibility for negative career ramifications, but there was an overall sense this sentiment had been lessening in recent years.

**Confidence.** Confidence was seen as very important by virtually all participants. It was seen as being linked strongly to competence and readiness for a leadership position. Many of the junior leaders, particularly those Soldiers in leadership positions who were not NCOs, reported at least some struggles with confidence. As their experience grew they reported that their confidence naturally followed, though it was still difficult at times to display confidence in all situations. Interestingly, the more senior leaders tended to couch the importance of confidence in unit terms, rather than individual terms. They expressed the value and necessity of displaying that confidence. In particular, they noted the impact that the presence or absence of confidence could have on mission effectiveness and morale within the unit during the most dangerous or challenging circumstances. They felt this was an example for new leaders to see and to emulate.

**Resilience.**  Many of the participants described themselves and their unit's personnel as "run down," testing the limits of their resilience.  They repeatedly noted that they were in survival mode a lot of the time and that they just pressed on no matter how exhausted they were to get the job done.  The recuperation from this exertion often ate into their family or relaxation time.  Several Soldiers also reported utilizing negative coping strategies, particularly alcohol, to alleviate stress.  They stated frankly that they knew this was not ideal, but they also stated that they had limited options for stress relief and that it "worked" for them to some extent.

*Intellect.*

**Mental Agility.**  For the most part, participants described a lack of freedom and opportunity to display or practice mental agility and critical thinking.  They overwhelmingly reported that tasks were often dictated in detail with little leeway for ingenuity or innovation.  Some NCOs also reported negative consequences for approaching tasks or situations in novel ways.  Overall they spoke about an environment in which the employment of mental agility is discouraged ("just do it how I told you to") or at the very least not actively fostered ("The way we do it works, why change it?").

**Sound Judgment.**  As with mental agility, the gist of the accounts from the Soldiers in these groups was that there were few situations in which junior leaders were allowed to exercise any level of judgment or decision-making beyond the most basic tasks.  Many stated that when those opportunities did arise, usually unexpectedly, they were unsure about how to proceed and often ended up focusing on the potential negative consequences of making a bad decision.  There was little description of any progressive or phased development for building capabilities in assessing decisional factors or conducting situational appraisal to support the growth of sound judgment.  In fact, it often appeared that a sink-or-swim model was more the norm.

**Innovation.**  For these junior leaders, engaging in innovative thinking was consistently reported as being seen as of little value to their superiors.  Soldiers reported a number of ideas or situations in which they conceived or even had been successful with a new method or approach to some problem or process.  However, the innovations were often met with skepticism or dismissed outright as "not how we do that."  This typically set up a dynamic in which they either stopped looking for ways to improve processes or just kept any attempts at improvement to themselves or within their small unit.

**Interpersonal Tact.**  Social skills and interpersonal interactions were seen as highly important to these NCOs and Soldiers.  Much of what they said about effective and ineffective leaders had at least something to do with their method of interacting with others.  One of the most frequent refrains in their descriptions of successful and effective leaders was of someone who could relate to others and tailor their interactions to the person and situation.  Many of them reported that they had put a lot of thought and effort into understanding the complexities of knowing when, how, and where to connect interpersonally with their Soldiers.  They had all experienced or seen the effects of leaders who were not effective interpersonally and were actively striving to avoid those same mistakes.  Stability was also prominent in their discussions.  They readily noted the negative impact of leaders who "blow up" or only interact in an aggressive and angry manner.  Many of them spoke about the importance of not reacting

emotionally in high stress situations, rather waiting to vent until the time, place, and audience was more appropriate.

**Expertise.** The need for tactical and technical competence was a primary topic within these discussions. Participants related many examples and anecdotes about the positive impact of technically and tactically sound leaders, as well as the problems that occur when leaders lack the requisite expertise to accomplish their mission. Another repeated concern was from NCOs who were in charge of mixed squads or sections. Virtually all of these leaders reported at least some lack of technical knowledge to effectively support Soldiers of various Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs) in their unit. It seemed to put them in an untenable situation. Not only was it troubling to a number of them because they felt that it reflected negatively on them as a leader (even though they had no means by which to know numerous tasks of other MOSs, other than learning from their Soldiers), but also due to the potential of stunting the development of their Soldiers' MOS-specific knowledge.

## Competencies

### *Leads.*

**Leads Others.** The NCOs and Soldiers talked about this aspect of leadership frequently. They were cognizant of the need to apply different approaches at different times and to different individuals in order to lead effectively. Though they did not often refer specifically to the *methods of leadership* from ARDP 6-22 (Department of the Army, 2019), they conveyed that they knew of and used most, if not all, of those methods at times. Resistance was a common theme as well. They reported varying levels of success in dealing with resistance. Often the most difficult situations were attributed to either a lack of experience or a lack of support from higher to enforce standards. Those who reported success in handling resistance often described interpersonal and motivational approaches as successful in working through that resistance. Motivation was another prominent topic. The junior leaders repeatedly emphasized the necessity of understanding the purpose of the order they received, so they could communicate that intent to their troops. When the command intent was unclear or absent, they noted that motivation and ultimately mission accomplishment and morale often suffered.

**Builds Trust.** The presence or absence of trust within a unit was reported to have a noticeable effect on many critical aspects of unit functioning, including morale and esprit de corps. By and large, trust within squads and teams was noted as being present and actively fostered. However, most participants reported a significant degradation of trust as echelon increased, usually beginning at battalion level. Trust at company level, and even platoon level, was reported as variable depending on the behavior of the command teams present at any given time.

A significant number of the participants noted that enforcing standards and discipline was difficult due to what was perceived as apathy or a lack of support from senior leaders, or concerns over reprisals or detrimental actions from disgruntled subordinates. A commonly reported issue was that they felt that they had a distinct lack of power to enforce basic discipline and standards, with some reporting that they had even been discouraged from enforcing certain

standards or exercising general military authority with Soldiers in other units. This was troubling to a number of them as they often knew the "right thing" to do, but did not do it due to the potential fallout from acting on that knowledge along with lack of trust in superiors to support them. This was reported to have a significant negative effect on morale and potentially even capability within the units in which it was happening.

Another salient aspect to the topic of trust was that while certain NCOs or officers could be trusted, one has to be careful about whom to trust. Participants reported several instances of information shared in confidence which was then disclosed even though there was no need to do so (e.g., there was no imminent risk to the safety of the Soldier). These events were seen as eroding trust not only in the individuals that broke confidence, but also toward leaders as a whole. This sentiment came up at all levels, but seemed particularly powerful for the junior enlisted Soldiers and junior NCOs.

**Extends Influence beyond the Chain of Command.** This topic was not addressed in much detail. The junior leaders had little opportunity or reason to perform these activities. However, from their discussion of other topics, they seemed to have an understanding of many of the elements in this sphere, such as the importance of cooperation between different entities, looking for consensus, and understanding the motivations and goals of other organizations.

**Leads by Example.** This was a prominent and vigorously discussed subject. The junior leaders universally embraced the importance of leading by example. They noted many positive and negative instances from their own experiences highlighting this. Overall, they reported striving to apply this principle in their daily activities. This aspect of the transition into leadership roles was frequently described as being difficult. As a team member, one could "hide" at times and "shine" at others. However, as a leader they knew that "there are always eyes on me" and that setting the standard was necessary 100% of the time. This adjustment to always being "on" could be difficult and a number of them reported salient examples of times when they failed to uphold standards that had a lasting impact on their development. Even if there was no official consequence or detrimental outcome, many of these NCOs still held onto these events as reminders that they had a responsibility to always be the standard for their troops.

**Communicates.** The participants were well aware of the importance of communication in leadership processes. They recounted multiple ways in which effective and ineffective communication impacted morale and was seen as a primary factor in mission outcomes. Interestingly, there was a lot of emphasis placed upon listening as vital to communication. Even though there were several reports that these NCOs did not feel listened to by senior leaders, or perhaps because of it, they said that they made it a point to listen to their subordinates. However, several NCOs also described situations in which communication was stifled or non-existent. This dynamic was reported to be more prevalent with younger Soldiers. There was some recognition that Army communications styles may need to adapt to the current generation. However, some participants linked technological advancements, overall cultural changes, and communication difficulties to the recent dissolution of discipline they reported seeing within the Army.

***Develops.***

**Creates a Positive Environment/Fosters Esprit de Corps.** The general consensus on this topic was that while it is very important, it is largely out of their hands. A number of the participants mentioned small steps to create positive environments, but overall they had little power to have an impact on the entire unit. They viewed command personnel as having the greatest power in this arena. Esprit de Corps was brought up, primarily in terms of being non-existent. Several of the longer serving participants noted that many Army traditions, especially the informal (such as unit specific traditions for recognition of Soldiers obtaining skill badges or identifiers), seem to have waned. They noted a number of reasons for this including unit turnover, lack of emphasis by senior leaders, and policy effects.

Many of the Soldiers remarked that policies aimed at eliminating hazing, bullying, harassment, and similar negative behaviors have affected some positive changes in this regard. However, they noted that the heavy-handed implementation also destroyed many positive activities and traditions because of the fear that they could be construed as running afoul of these policies. This was reportedly a major factor in the "Army as just another job" sentiment espoused by many newer Soldiers in contrast to the unique pride and identity historically associated with military service.

Demonstrating care for others was also a frequent topic. The leaders talked about how they do this through getting to know their Soldiers and trying to alleviate undue burdens as much as possible. A significant amount of the discussion on this topic was focused on their belief that their leaders had little regard for them or their well-being beyond what role they could play in supporting the leaders' officer evaluation report (OER) or noncommissioned officer evaluation report (NCOER) bullets.

**Prepares Self.** The content related to self-preparation tended to emphasize a general lack of time and opportunity to do so. A number of the participants stated that MOS knowledge was very important for leaders, but that in many cases quickly promoted NCOs had not had the time necessary to acquire that critical knowledge prior to becoming leaders. This was due in part to time constraints, but also often linked to a lack of mentors or other individuals from whom to learn the important nuances of their jobs.

Regarding preparedness for expected and unexpected challenges, there were two general lines of thought. One was that junior leaders were typically prepared for expected challenges, but that unexpected challenges were difficult because the junior leaders felt that they were not equipped to adequately deal with these events. The lack of adequate preparation was seen as resulting from too much micromanagement which inhibited their learning opportunities. This, combined with pressure from leaders higher in the chain of command not to fail at any task, often resulted in the junior leader's immediate supervisors taking over the direction of unexpected tasks or explicitly instructing them on how to accomplish every detail, thus not leaving them the opportunity to learn to handle these events themselves. As to occasions when they had to act in unforeseen circumstances without direct guidance, these leaders recounted that they tended to "wing it" or "just figure it out" as events unfolded. This was reported more often by the newer leaders and was seen as highly stressful and an area in which they lacked confidence. However, those with more time in leadership positions reported that this lessened as they acquired more knowledge and experience.

Self-awareness was presented as fairly dichotomous; either they tended to eschew self-reflection or they used it as an integral tool for their development. Of those who tended toward self-awareness, a number reported that, at least early in their leadership experiences, they tended to over-analyze mistakes or alternate possible actions or decisions they could have made. This caused some additional self-doubt in a number of them, at least until they were able to have a stronger experiential base from which to draw.

**Develops Others.** Much of the discussion related to this topic centered on a perceived lack of mentorship opportunities and lack of meaningful interaction with senior leaders. Many lamented that they did not receive much in this domain prior to assuming leadership positions, often reporting that they were pushed into leadership roles before they were ready due to a lack of NCOs in their units. Even once in those roles, often as specialists, they reported that overt guidance and mentoring often only happened when they sought it out or potentially after a negative event or outcome. A few participants noted that they had received good mentorship from a senior NCO. However, the mentorship was usually the result of the mentee identifying a good mentor and approaching that potential mentor to establish the relationship.

While the consensus of many of the groups was that as junior leaders they strive to foster growth in their Soldiers, they are only allowed limited occasions to do so. Even when these occasions did occur, these junior leaders often found it difficult to provide good mentorship and quality developmental events to their Soldiers. This was challenging as they had to work these developmental sessions in amongst all of their other responsibilities, but also because they lacked a defined experiential model from which to provide this mentorship.

**Stewards the Profession.** Overall, these leaders were not in positions to have a large effect on the organizational culture or processes beyond their small unit. Several did note that they could see influences of certain senior leaders even after they left, which modeled this aspect for them. They also remarked on the value of developing subordinates, even though they often reported not receiving as much development as they would have liked. A number of the NCOs stated that they do take steps to develop and allow their subordinates to go to schools and get additional training, but they are frequently over-ridden by command priorities. More than a few of the participants noted personal experiences with school slots being cancelled or delayed because of intervening requirements.

*Achieves.*

**Gets Results.** This facet of leadership was very apparent in the discussions. The participants were well aware that their main priority was facilitating mission accomplishment through proper preparation, planning, and execution. However, Soldiers often remarked that their senior leaders did not consistently provide these enabling elements for them. The NCOs and Soldiers often stated that instead of their leaders providing clear guidance and prioritizations, removing barriers, etc., the opposite actually occurred. Overall, the junior leaders communicated a sense that many activities and tasks were less efficient, longer, or much harder than necessary because of a lack of information or follow through from their leaders.

**Other Major Themes**

**Perceived Lack of Empowerment of NCOs.** This topic came up during every group, usually as one of the first subjects discussed. This issue was clearly of high importance to the majority of participants, from the junior enlisted Soldiers up through the senior NCOs. The perceived obstructions to the empowerment of junior NCOs were expressed from a number of different angles, for instance, micromanagement of squad level physical training, lack of autonomy to accomplish even routine tasks, lack of direct control over the Soldiers in their small unit, and senior leaders undercutting their authority. It is highlighted separately here because it does not correspond directly with any of the attributes or competencies in the model. However, the manifestation of this issue permeated all domains of the leadership model to some extent and was generally seen as the primary impediment to effective NCO leadership.

**Difficulties with Leader Identity.** While rarely expressed in terms of leader identity directly, this theme recurred throughout these sessions, primarily in that many of the junior leaders reported not having a strong identity as a leader. They typically referred to leading by virtue of position and necessity, but that they did not often feel that they were an active agent in that process nor did they feel like they were "really" leaders. Primarily, they felt they were simply conduits for directives and instructions from superiors without much leeway or decision making needed, or allowed, on their part. This tied in directly with the micromanagement of virtually all activities that was reported. Not surprisingly, NCOs with more experience as leaders reported having a more firmly established personal leadership identity and were much more fluent in discussing what that identity meant to them and how it guided their behavior.

## Discussion

Overall, the participants in the focus groups showed great enthusiasm for the subject of early leader development and role transition. The general consensus from these sessions was that NCOs should have more latitude and more responsibility to lead, train, and care for their Soldiers. There were a number of ideas about how this could be accomplished. Most of the solutions were related to the notion that too many daily activities are too rigidly dictated, leaving them with limited opportunities to exercise their own leadership skills or decision-making. They also described these constraints as a major limiting factor on their capacity to engage with their Soldiers in a meaningful way and foster their development.

The participants displayed a good deal of understanding of the NCO's position within the Army leadership structure. They were well aware of the importance of this role and how, if it was operating as intended in the doctrine, they could have a strong positive effect on the Army as a whole by leading and developing Soldiers. They were also very eager to take on this role, even if it increased their responsibility.

The following section examines the issues which were most relevant to the transition into initial leadership roles. The discussion is framed in the context of the three major attributes (character, presence, and intellect) and three major competencies (leads, develops, and achieves) in the Army Leadership Requirements Model (see Figure 3). The sub-sections of these primary components will be discussed, but not as individual items as they were in the Results section, in

order to allow for a synergistic discussion of the major themes.  There were many interesting and relevant issues raised during the focus groups.  However, this project's objectives deal strictly with these transitional issues for new leaders and, as such, the discussion will be constrained to those issues.  This is not to dismiss the other issues raised, but simply an acknowledgement of the scope of this research.

**Attributes**

**Character.**  Several dimensions of character were salient for the junior leaders in this sample.  They were fairly uniform in demonstrating their understanding of the fundamental nature of character in making a successful leader.  However, they were also consistent in reporting their experience with at least some leaders and senior leaders who appeared to rarely, or at least variably, display these qualities.  This left many of them with too few positive examples for "what an NCO should be."

The first area presented in the Army Leadership Requirements Model is character.  This is likely not a coincidence as the following attributes and competencies largely stem from having a strong base of character traits necessary to be a successful leader.  As such, it is encouraging that these junior leaders appeared to grasp the importance of these attributes for successful leadership, even if they were still working out what that meant to them personally.  Several noted it would be beneficial if leadership experiences and primers were started not as senior specialists, but much earlier in their development cycle.  The recognition that leader development processes benefit from early engagement shows an intuitive, or perhaps experiential, understanding of something that academia is in the midst of studying (Murphy & Johnson, 2011; Yeager & Callahan, 2016).

Discipline was cited as a particularly difficult issue to navigate and problems with discipline were brought up at multiple points during most, if not all, of the discussions.  The prevailing sense was that discipline had been steadily eroding and was reaching critical levels in many units.  These Soldiers noted that even over the course of their time in the Army (most of the Soldiers in this sub-set had five years or less time in service) they noticed a decline in the maintenance of general discipline and military bearing.  They were quite vocal about the negative impact this had on them as junior leaders, their ability to maintain standards within their small units, and on the overall morale of their larger units.  The shift from the use of on-the-spot corrections and corrective actions (e.g., making Soldiers do push-ups for minor infractions) to formally documenting even minor infractions was seen as highly detrimental to the day-to-day good order of units and to the development of basic discipline in new Soldiers.

For senior leaders who reported discipline issues, fear of administrative reprisals from problematic Soldiers as well as the lack of command support and follow-through, further degraded these NCOs' willingness to actively maintain standards.  It was safer "to just keep a lid on the problem," as long as it did not draw the attention of their senior leaders, instead of struggling with the obstacles they felt were placed in their way.  They clearly communicated that they knew this should be within their role, but they felt powerless to enact the changes they saw needed to be made.  Generally the lack of discipline, especially when combined with the perceived lack of support for instilling discipline, was seen as increasing the difficulty of the transition into leadership roles and their ability to function effectively early in those roles.  There

is a reason discipline is at the forefront of much of the Army's doctrine, from ADP 6-22: "Discipline allows Army professionals to choose the harder right over the easier wrong in the face of temptation, obstacles, and adversity." (Department of the Army, 2019, pp. 1-6).

Empathy was another area in which participants saw disconnection between "what should be and what is." Many of them described having had leaders who were not empathetic and made no effort to connect with their Soldiers. They also described ways in which they had been determined to be better in that aspect, with moderate to high success reported by most. Leader development literature has many lines of research examining various aspects of leader empathy and connectedness. The perceived role of empathy in leadership has steadily grown in importance and it has been shown to be as effective as more traditional leadership qualities such as task accomplishment (Kellett, Humphrey & Sleeth, 2002). The effects of the presence or absence of empathy in leading Soldiers was apparent to this group and it appeared to be among their primary considerations as leaders.

**Presence.** Building capability in this attribute appeared to be challenging for most of the new leaders. While most of them related that they eventually became adept at displaying confidence and bearing, it took time and mindful effort to become automatic, or at least easier for them. Some of the increased proficiency in displaying presence was likely due simply to maturation. However, as with most pursuits, experience and repetition are probably very strong contributors in building genuine presence in young leaders. There is growing evidence that there is a mutually reinforcing cycle of leadership behavior, motivation to lead, and building of leader identity (e.g. Miscenko, Guenter & Day, 2017; Yeager & Callahan, 2016). This roughly correlates with the time-worn Army adage "fake it 'til you make it" in relation to assumption of leadership duties as simply displaying the confidence and bearing of a leader can serve to be reinforcing and result in actualizing those attributes. Additionally, recognition and reinforcement of leadership behaviors should increase new leaders willing to engage in more of that behavior. This does not need to be a formal recognition or award, it can be as simple as a supportive comment from a superior.

Resilience and recovery from stress were concepts that seemed to change significantly after these Soldiers assumed leadership roles. While stress and recovery are certainly present for all Soldiers, these new leaders often described a self-sacrificing aspect once they became leaders. They were very deliberate in putting forth more effort once they became leaders, in order to lighten the load for their Soldiers or to make sure they were setting a positive standard. This, however, seemed to promote a proneness to overexertion among these leaders as they reported some difficulty in maintaining a balance which would allow them adequate decompression, stress relief and recovery time. They were highly cognizant of the need to push themselves to set the example for their Soldiers. Additionally, the operational burden was quite high for some units with deployments, required training events, and other activities leading to wide-spread burnout in those units.

**Intellect.** The prevailing message from the discussion of this attribute was that junior leaders are rarely afforded the opportunity to develop these abilities. Their description of the pervasive micromanagement of virtually all tasks left little room for any exercise of decision-making, judgment, or innovation. This scarcity of learning trials in which new leaders could

actively engage these facets of intellect appeared to slow the growth of these critical skills. This is concerning because in the projected future operating environment Army leaders will be asked to operate in highly complex and rapidly changing environments, often semi-independently or in isolation. Cognitive flexibility, innovative approaches, and novel solutions are prized for their positive contributions to managing and overcoming the complex problems encountered within organizations (e.g. Mauer & London, 2018; Mumford, Todd, Higgs, & McIntosh, 2017; Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000; Stenmark, Shipman, & Mumford, 2011; Vincent, Decker & Mumford, 2002). If leaders at all levels are not empowered to exercise these skills, stagnation often results. The Army espouses these intellectual attributes as priorities for having an efficient and modern force, however, the impression given by these junior leaders is that this dictate is not filtering down to the lowest levels of the organization.

The Army's highest levels of leadership have acknowledged the importance of growth through experiencing both success and failure as part of the development process (Department of the Army, 2018a). The perception of the leaders in this sample was that because of the pressure on senior leaders to complete short-notice, no-fail taskings, and to "chase bullets" (i.e., performing tasks not because it would benefit the unit or their Soldiers, but because it would look good on their evaluation), failure was not an option. The junior leader would then be directed on how exactly to accomplish tasks, denying them the chance to make decisions and succeed or fail on their own, thereby learning a useful lesson. This intolerance for failure and absence of learning from one's mistakes appears to be restricting the timely growth of these leaders.

On a more positive note, the importance of being able to interact effectively and getting to know their Soldiers was often stated as being the utmost importance for these leaders to be effective on a daily basis in the roles. The difference between leaders who could and could not, or would not communicate effectively was obvious to these participants. Interpersonal effectiveness and emotional intelligence are widely seen as a critical components of leader development (e.g. Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014; Prati, Douglas, Ferris, Ammeter, & Buckley 2003). The imperative "know your Soldiers" was probably the common single statement in all of these sessions, highlighting these leaders understanding of how vital this is to effective leadership.

**Competencies**

**Leads.** Not surprisingly, the "leads" competency inspired intense discussion. While much of the tone tended toward the negative aspects, the willingness and enthusiasm of these participants to lead Soldiers was apparent throughout these discussions. The consistent reporting of the lack of opportunity or autonomy to exercise even basic control of their small units seems to indicate a pervasive issue within the force currently. The foundational leadership experiences defined within Army doctrine as vital to leader development largely seem to be absent for many junior leaders. They have little latitude to lead or make substantive decisions of their own accord. An important component of this issue is the apparent prohibition on failure. While Army materials, such as ADP 6-22 (Department of the Army, 2019), speak to the value of failures or mistakes as learning experiences, there seems to exist little opportunity or tolerance for this type of developmental milestone. Without having these formative leadership

experiences, these junior leaders often learn these lessons much later than they would like and likely much later than would be ideal for the Army. Academic findings support the importance of early and continuing leadership experiences to facilitating long-term leader development (Murphy & Johnson, 2011).

Also informative in the data was an open acknowledgement, even by some of these NCOs referring to themselves, that many Soldiers are promoted to NCO before they are ready to lead. While this has probably been the case historically to some extent, the increasing speed with which promotions are occurring far out-paces the Army's career road map in DA-PAM 600-25 and likely exacerbates the situation (Department of the Army, 2018c). Having a bank of experience from which to draw is crucial for a leader; new leaders routinely have not had time to deposit much into their bank when they assume leadership roles. As an example, many of the junior leaders reported deficits in knowledge of the basics of the Army, from operational and process knowledge to available services and support for service members and families, which was mostly attributed to their short time in the Army before promotion. This can, and did in several reported scenarios, affect these leaders' ability to effectively prepare their Soldiers and care for their overall wellbeing.

This also goes directly to the heart of the transition issue as well. The shift in role and responsibility from follower or team member to leader can be difficult (Mauer & London, 2018). There are also significant detrimental effects that can occur for the individual, their team, and the organization when a leader does not transition quickly and effectively into a leadership role (Levin, 2010). Timing the acquisition of skills to coincide with the leadership phase in which they are needed is important as well (Mumford, Marks, Connelly, Zaccaro, Reiter-Palmon, 2000). Syncing the promotion of any individual to correspond to the exact time they are ready to assume the role is unrealistic in any context. However, given what was reported in this sample and in previous data, currently there appears to be too little control over the pacing of junior NCO promotions under the current paradigm. The most senior members of this sample reported that in recent years Soldiers are often promoted before they are ready to assume the responsibilities of being an NCO. This may be a driving factor behind the increase in micromanagement by those senior leaders; however, the unintended consequence of that approach is that their subordinate leaders are then held back even further in their development.

**Develops.** The first element of this competency, "creates a positive environment/fosters esprit de corps," was a point of contention for many of the participants. Many of them pointed to a distinct lack of the esprit de corps in the Army generally and to lack of pride in being a Soldier they see in many of their peers today. Many of the Soldiers who had more time in service noted that the Army seemed to be turning itself into "a more typical workplace," rather than something distinct and special. Their opinions tended to point to this as a contributor to many of the problems they were seeing including lack of trust, lack of cohesion, and lack of discipline. There was a sense that the mystique of "wearing the uniform" has been diminished to a large degree as the Army tries to rebrand itself to appeal to newer generations. Interestingly, there has recently been a particular focus on revamping the Army's uniform options recently. The decision to develop a new service uniform was a high profile undertaking to refresh the dated style of that uniform. However, instead of a new uniform, the redesign was specifically styled to be reminiscent of those worn in the WWII era, intentionally harkening back to the pride in the uniform associated with the "Greatest Generation" (United States Army, n.d.). That the

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invocation of historical pride and service to the country was the reasoning guiding the service uniform redesign seems to corroborate the Soldiers' reports that the uniform had diminished in importance as a symbol and was in need of action to renew its place of pride within the Army and the country at large.

The topic of self-development in leader development literature points to the importance of continual learning and improvement to continue development as a leader (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014; Murphy & Johnson, 2011). The Army is increasingly bringing this aspect to the forefront of the NCO development materials, as shown in the significant revamp of the self-development curriculum in the recently unveiled the Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System (NCOPDS). However, it appears that many Soldiers experience some significant hurdles to actualizing this aspect of development. A common report from this sample was that frequent and prolonged field exercises, sometimes on only a few days' notice, inhibited Soldiers ability to complete civilian education courses. Additionally, these field exercises and deployments could interrupt progression through Army schooling. Due to the need for units to be at specific manning levels at training events, Soldiers are at times deferred from attending schools. These delays could affect a Soldier's timely career progression. Although this practice appears to be counter to policy, it has been reported frequently enough that it should not immediately be considered an anomaly.

**Achieves.** The NCOs and Soldiers were keenly aware of the need to get results in their daily activities to support their unit's mission and larger Army objectives. One of the more interesting points related to this was the means by which they achieved results. There were frequent reports that the "results" that showed up in reports or administrative accountings did not reflect the actual results or reality on the ground. The fact that it was openly known that the reported statuses of equipment and personnel were often a fallacy was troubling to these leaders. They seemed to struggle with the knowledge that they were in some way part of these deceptive practices. However they also communicated that they felt they had no recourse to correct these situations because those senior to them were ultimately the individuals reporting incorrect statuses. There seemed to be a significant level of cognitive dissonance in relation to this situation.

They also struggled with what they felt was an inversion of several of the precepts in this competency displayed by their superiors. Instead of providing distinct priorities, removing barriers, and providing useful feedback, they often received little or nothing other than a list of taskings. For routine activities this could be navigated easily; however, with unfamiliar activities these leaders were often unsure of the relative importance of the multitude of tasks for which they were responsible. This lack of direction from higher in the chain is counter to both the basic Army principle of communicating clear orders and priorities as well as academic findings for communicating information as necessary to effective and efficient team functioning, particularly in a complex environment (Connaughton, Shuffler, & Goodwin, 2011; Marks, Zaccaro, & Mathieu, 2000; Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001). Understanding of Commander's Intent is foundational to Army actions. If the Commander's Intent is absent, incomplete, or not communicated properly, the entire unit becomes inefficient or even ineffective.

Reports of the need for more clear guidance seem to contradict the also frequently reported pervasiveness of micromanagement these NCOs encounter. The vacillation between

these two poles of "too much" and "not enough" left some of these new leaders in an unsure state. Some of them, usually the most junior, confided that they feel paralyzed to a degree in the absence of clear, direct orders. They largely reported being fearful of failing and bringing negative attention on themselves and their unit which inhibited their initiative to complete tasks.

Despite all of the difficulties they encountered, participants appear to have internalized strong motivation and push to get results where they felt comfortable and able to exert some control. The sense of pride in accomplishing goals and objectives was apparent within this junior leader cohort. Even for fairly routine and menial tasks, these leaders expressed an understanding of why maintaining high standards was important as well as what their role is, or should be, in modeling that behavior.

**Additional Considerations**

As highlighted in the Results above, there appears to be an underlying thread of perceived disempowerment throughout the NCO Corps in the Army today. While it is likely impossible to ascertain when this became the norm across the force, it appears to have gained momentum in recent years. The degree to which this was expressed was concerning, given that multiple participants from different units in completely separate sessions offered up either the term "learned helplessness" or words to that effect when referring to the functioning of junior NCOs. This was somewhat alarming because it denotes a marked departure from the essence of the NCO Creed.

Again, it is important to remember that this report is based on a small sample from one post. Supporting the conclusion that the disempowerment of junior NCOs is a wide-spread rather than local issue was the recent message from the Army's senior leaders regarding the need for empowering NCOs (Department of the Army, 2018a). However, as this is such a large and complex issue, more study is needed define the parameters of the issues with NCO empowerment and develop recommendations for enhancing current and future NCO engagement.

Most of the senior NCOs who participated in this project spoke of an earlier time when NCOs were expected to fully live the NCO Creed and did so on a daily basis. The change happened fairly quickly, in organizational terms, so perhaps it can revert to that earlier state quickly as well. In order to do so, current NCOs will have to make conscious, deliberate changes to develop the next generation of NCOs to this standard. They will also require the trust and support of commanding officers in order to be allowed the latitude to re-gain their role as leaders, trainers, mentors, and problem solvers. This will take a rebuilding of trust between echelons and between commissioned officers and NCOs to allow for this level of autonomy and responsibility to be returned to NCO leaders.

**Conclusion**

Given the Army's perpetual need for junior leaders to lead, train, and take care of Soldiers, facilitating successful and timely assumption of that role by new leaders is critical. The results of this project should help to inform future research focused on enhancing enlisted leader development, particularly at the critical point at which they first assume leadership duties.

There are two primary take away messages from this preliminary work. First, the Army appears to have a solid foundation from which to build. The leadership development resources and materials for NCOs are grounded in generational Army knowledge and are consistent with predominant academic principles of leader development. However, the second major point is that the vast majority of junior leaders do not seem to be benefitting from those resources as early as would be ideal. The crux of that shortfall appears to be tied to meaningful and consistent early leadership experiences. The doctrine spells out the importance of these experiences, but the current Army reality does not appear to allow many new leaders the requisite experiences until they are already in a leadership role. This then delays their acquisition and development of many of the key attributes and competencies found in the Army Leadership Requirement model, leaving room for potential missteps and inefficiency. However, there also appeared to be some reticence from these new leaders to seize the opportunities that do arise, due to fear of failure, potential consequences, or a lack of confidence to act decisively. As the Army moves toward increasingly independent functioning at all levels, it is imperative that all leaders possess these qualities before they move into leadership roles.

It is promising that while there were significant issues reported across echelons and functional areas of NCO leadership, the NCOs themselves still have a working model of the way things "should be." They seem to have a solid understanding of and appreciation for the historic role of what the NCO has been and, even though they may not be in a position to fully enact that role currently, they can see potential for doing so in the future. They also consistently reported that they are willing to take on the challenge of leadership and develop the next generation of Soldiers. By leveraging that willingness and supporting the acquisition of leadership experience and skills, junior leaders can be at the forefront of the resurgence of the NCO Corps. This project lays the groundwork for additional research to document the existing capabilities as well as identify short and long term needs for ensuring junior leaders are well prepared to assume their first leadership position. A useful direction for future research would be to determine the most efficacious points at which empirically supported interventions could be inserted prior to and shortly after a Solder takes on a leadership role. In particular, building an iterative framework to guide early exposure to leadership experiences would likely support development of critical leadership skills and knowledge in preparation for assumption of leadership duties.

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Appendix

Data Collection Instruments

Focus Group Protocol

| Interview Information | Interview #: <br><br> Date: <br><br> Time: <br><br> Location: <br><br> Interviewer(s) Name: <br><br> Number of participants: <br><br> General observations (e.g., one person dominated the conversation, this group did not have much to say; contextual info): |
|---|---|
| **Introduction and Research Purpose** | Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for taking the time out of your schedules to be here. My name is Larry Golba and I am a research psychologist with the U.S. Army Research Institute Field Unit based at Fort Hood. [Introduce other researchers who are taking notes]. We are conducting this research to better understand the transition from junior enlisted to noncommissioned officer. Specifically we are interested in the challenges involved in this transition broadly from both personal and professional perspectives. We would also like to get direct information, in your words, regarding your personal experiences, both successes and failures, as you or others have navigated the transition from contributor to leader. <br><br> This is not an evaluation of your performance or capabilities as a leader. We are purely interested in your experiences as someone who has, or will soon, become a leader because you are the experts and we are here to learn from you. The information you provide will help us to improve our understanding of this critical phase of career development and help us to ease and accelerate this transition for future NCOs. <br><br> No one participating will be identifiable in any products emerging from this research. <br><br> Before we continue, do you have any questions? <br><br> For more information about this process, please take a few minutes to read the Informed Consent Form. If you have any questions about the privacy statement, Informed Consent Form, or the talk today, let us know. And remember, you are free to stop participating at any time, if you so choose. |

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| **Format for the discussion** | Before we begin, I would like to review the format for today's discussion. <ul><li>There are no right or wrong answers. We are just asking for your thoughts and opinions based on your own personal experience. We are here to learn from you.</li><li>We will ask you several questions; we do not have to go in any particular order but we do want everyone to feel comfortable and welcome to speak when you feel that you want to do so. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions, that is fine. It is completely acceptable for you to sit and listen.</li><li>We want this to be a relaxed but professional discussion, so feel free to respond to what others are saying, whether you agree or disagree – we only ask that you be respectful of one another. It is always very helpful to know how when you've had very similar experiences and when your experiences have been very different.</li><li>Again, all of your responses are confidential. We are not going to ask for anything that could identify you and ask that you refrain from identifying anyone else as you share your experiences.</li></ul> |
| **Demographics Form** | Before we start the discussion, please complete this demographics form. |
| **Role Transition (Specialists and Corporals)** | ***Note, the following are potential areas of probing during the focus groups to guide researchers in data collection. The questions utilized in each session will be tailored to fit the knowledge and experience of the group members. Some topics may not be relevant in every session. ***<br><br>Expectations<ul><li>What are your expectations for becoming an NCO?</li><li>What aspects of being a leader do you think you are prepared to manage currently?</li><li>What areas do you think you need additional knowledge or experience to be an effective leader?</li><li>How do you expect your professional life change after promotion?</li><li>How do you expect your personal life change after promotion?</li></ul>Mentorship<ul><li>Do you have someone you consider a mentor for leadership skills?<ul><li>Who is it?</li><li>Is it formal mentoring? Informal?</li></ul></li><li>Have you had active mentorship toward assuming leadership roles?</li><li>What does effective leadership mentoring look like?</li></ul>Identity<ul><li>Do you view yourself as a leader?<ul><li>What makes you a leader?</li></ul></li><li>How do you know that your subordinates view you as a leader?</li><li>How do you know that your superiors view you as a leader?</li><li>What other professional roles or identities do you currently hold (MOS/CMF, Unit, Command, etc.)?</li></ul> |

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| | o How do you see yourself now?<br>o What are your plans/goals for the near term?<br>o What are your plans/goals for the long term?<br>• What personal or social identities do you currently hold?<br><br>Operationally Defining Leadership as a Junior NCO<br>• How do you define leadership in a general sense?<br>• What does it mean to be a leader?<br><br>Problem Solving<br>• When you recognize a problem or obstacle, what do you do first?<br>   o What do you do next?<br>   o And after that?<br>• What steps do you take to resolve it?<br>• Do you consult with superiors or peers?<br>• Do you include your subordinates?<br>• How do you select a course of action?<br>• How do you measure the outcome of the action?<br><br>Stories of Role Transition<br>• Reflect on your own experiences with (or expectations for) being in a leadership role. Tell us about a situation in which you employed knowledge, training or a novel idea to successfully address an issue related to your shift into a leadership role. Or, if you prefer, tell us about a time you experienced a particularly difficult situation in changing roles from team member to leader. *(Note - we may select one or two Soldiers that have particularly salient readiness stories for additional in-depth collection. See "Capturing Role Transition Stories" for questions that will be asked).* |
| **Role Transition (Sergeants)** | \*\*\*Note, the following are potential areas of probing during the focus groups to guide researchers in data collection. The questions utilized in each session will be tailored to fit the knowledge and experience of the group members. Some topics may not be relevant in every session. \*\*\*<br><br>Expectations<br>• What were your expectations for becoming an NCO?<br>• What aspects of being a leader do you think you were prepared to manage currently?<br>• What areas do you think you could have benefitted from additional knowledge or experience to be an effective leader?<br>• How did your professional life change after promotion?<br>• How did your personal life change after promotion?<br><br>Mentorship<br>• Do you have someone you consider a mentor for leadership skills? |

- o Who is it?
- o Is it formal mentoring? Informal?
- Have you had active mentorship toward assuming leadership roles?
- What does effective leadership mentoring look like?

Experiences
- Did you have leadership experience prior to joining the Army?
- What aspects of becoming an NCO/leader were you well-prepared for at the time you were promoted?
- What aspects of becoming an NCO/leader were you not prepared for at the time you were promoted?
- What are the most important things you have learned as you have grown as a leader? What would you tell a junior enlisted Soldier who is about to become an NCO to help them make that transition successfully?
  - o Where did you learn this? When?
  - o How useful would that knowledge have been in speeding up or easing your shift into being a leader?

Identity
- Do you view yourself as a leader?
  - o What makes you a leader?
  - o In what ways have you changed since becoming a leader?
- How do you know that your subordinates view you as a leader?
- How do you know that your superiors view you as a leader?
- What other professional roles or identities do you currently hold (MOS/CMF, Unit, Command, etc.)?
  - o How do you see yourself now?
  - o What are your plans/goals for the near term?
  - o What are your plans/goals for the long term?
- What personal or social identities do you currently hold?

Operationally Defining Leadership as an NCO
- How do you define leadership in a general sense?
- How do you define leadership for yourself, in your duty position?
- What does it mean to be a leader?
- Do you think the requirements for being a leader in the Army have changed over time? If so, what is different? Is the change better or worse?

Role Conflict
- Have you had to exercise leadership authority (or GMA) over former peers?
  - o How did you approach the situation?
  - o How did the peer(s) react?
  - o Were there further consequences of this action?
    - ▪ Professional?

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| | <ul><li><ul><li>Social?</li><li>Self?</li></ul></li></ul><ul><li>Have you had any difficulties with social relationships as a result of becoming a leader?<ul><li>How did you approach the situation?</li><li>How did the peer(s) react?</li><li>Were there further consequences of this action?</li></ul></li></ul>Problem Solving<ul><li>When you recognize a problem or obstacle, what do you do first?<ul><li>What do you do next?</li><li>And after that?</li></ul></li><li>What steps do you take to resolve it?</li><li>Do you consult with superiors or peers?</li><li>Do you include your subordinates?</li><li>How do you select a course of action?</li><li>How do you measure the outcome of the action?</li></ul>Stories of Role Transition<ul><li>Reflect on your own experiences with (or expectations for) promotion to NCO.  Tell us about a situation in which you employed knowledge, training or a novel idea to successfully address an issue related to your shift into a leadership role.  Or, if you prefer, tell us about a time you experienced a particularly difficult situation in changing roles from team member to leader. *(Note - we may select one or two Soldiers that have particularly salient readiness stories for additional in-depth collection.  See "Capturing Role Transition Stories" for questions that will be asked).*</li></ul> |
| **Role Transition (First Sergeants)** | \*\*\*Note, the following are potential areas of probing during the focus groups to guide researchers in data collection.  The questions utilized in each session will be tailored to fit the knowledge and experience of the group members.  Some topics may not be relevant in every session. \*\*\*<br><br>Expectations<ul><li>What were your expectations for becoming an NCO?</li><li>What aspects of being a leader do you think you were prepared to manage currently?</li><li>What areas do you think you could have benefitted from additional knowledge or experience to be an effective leader?</li><li>How did your professional life change after promotion?</li><li>How did your personal life change after promotion?</li></ul>Mentorship<ul><li>Do you have someone you consider a mentor for leadership skills?<ul><li>Who is it?</li><li>Is it formal mentoring?  Informal?</li></ul></li></ul> |

- Have you had active mentorship toward assuming leadership roles?
- What does effective leadership mentoring look like?

Experiences
- Did you have leadership experience prior to joining the Army?
- What aspects of becoming an NCO/leader were you well-prepared for at the time you were promoted?
- What aspects of becoming an NCO/leader were you not prepared for at the time you were promoted?
- What are the most important things you have learned as you have grown as a leader?  What would you tell a junior enlisted Soldier who is about to become an NCO to help them make that transition successfully?
  - Where did you learn this?  When?
  - How useful would that knowledge have been in speeding up or easing your shift into being a leader?

Identity
- Do you view yourself as a leader?
  - What makes you a leader?
  - In what ways have you changed since becoming a leader?
- How do you know that your subordinates view you as a leader?
- How do you know that your superiors view you as a leader?
- What other professional roles or identities do you currently hold (MOS/CMF, Unit, Command, etc.)?
  - What are your plans/goals for the near term?
  - What are your plans/goals for the long term?
- What personal or social identities do you currently hold?

Operationally Defining Leadership as an NCO
- How do you define leadership in a general sense?
- How do you define leadership for yourself, in your duty position?
- What does it mean to be a leader?
  - How has your definition changed over time?
- Do you think the requirements for being a leader in the Army have changed over time?  If so, what is different?  Is the change better or worse?

Role Conflict
- Have you had to exercise leadership authority (or GMA) over former peers?
  - How did you approach the situation?
  - How did the peer(s) react?
  - Were there further consequences of this action?
    - Professional?
    - Social?
    - Self?

| | |
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| | • Have you had any difficulties with social relationships as a result of becoming a leader?<br>    o How did you approach the situation?<br>    o How did the peer(s) react?<br>    o Were there further consequences of this action?<br><br>Problem Solving<br>• When you recognize a problem or obstacle, what do you do first?<br>    o What do you do next?<br>    o And after that?<br>• What steps do you take to resolve it?<br>• Do you consult with superiors or peers?<br>• Do you include your subordinates?<br>• How do you select a course of action?<br>• How do you measure the outcome of the action?<br><br>Stories of Role Transition<br>• Reflect on your own experiences with (or expectations for) promotion to NCO. Tell us about a situation in which you employed knowledge, training or a novel idea to successfully address an issue related to your shift into a leadership role. Or, if you prefer, tell us about a time you experienced a particularly difficult situation in changing roles from team member to leader. *(Note - we may select one or two Soldiers that have particularly salient readiness stories for additional in-depth collection. See "Capturing Role Transition Stories" for questions that will be asked).* |
| **Capturing Role Transition Stories** | \*\*\*Note, these are questions that will be asked of a Soldier with a particularly salient example, as opportunities occur. While the focus will be on a specific story from one participant, relevant input from the group may also be collected.\*\*\*<br>We would like to learn more about the experiences that you've had or directly observed for Soldiers making the transition from junior enlisted to NCO. We will use enclosure D-3 (Role Transition Story Map) to write notes.<br><br>Although several examples might come to mind, we will try to focus on one or two examples to gather enough detail to be able to paint a full picture of the situation. Situations or anecdotes in which you (or someone you observed) made a decision or took a deliberate action from which you learned something that helped you to be better equipped to lead or to form your identity as a leader would be most helpful.<br><br>To start, can you please tell us about a challenging or difficult situation you experienced in assuming a leadership position (or in becoming an NCO)?<br><br>Description of who is telling the story<br>• Current rank<br>• Duty position<br>• Time in service |

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| | Setting<br>• Who were the players in the story? Who is this story about?<br>• What was your role in the situation? Or, is this a story that you heard from someone else?<br>• What was your duty position at time of the story?<br>• What was the location, environmental factors, time/day, garrison/deployed, and other relevant METT/TC?<br>Challenge/Situation<br>• What was the challenging situation that you faced?<br>• What were the goals of this situation–what were you trying to accomplish?<br>• What was the nature of the conflict or problem?<br>• Did you, your Soldiers, and leaders perceive the situation similarly?<br>• What external challenges or barriers did you face in this situation?<br>• Did the operating environment help or hinder your actions?<br>• What actions or decisions did you make to address the situation?<br>• What was effective in managing or solving this situation?<br>• What did you learn that you could apply later?<br>• In this situation, did you demonstrate good leadership? How so?<br>Outcome<br>• Were your actions effective? How do you know?<br>• Did things you learned from mentors or previous leaders you had help or hinder the outcome?<br>• Did leadership training help you to handle the situation?<br>• Looking back, what would you have done differently?<br>• What would have better prepared you for this situation? |
| Final thoughts | Those were all of the questions that we wanted to ask.<br><br>• Are we missing anything?<br>• Do you have any questions for us?<br><br>**Thank you for your time.** |

Demographic Sheet

Date: _____ Time: _____

1. **Current military rank?** _____ (e.g., PFC, SPC, SGT)

2. **Time in that rank?**

   ☐ Less than 12 months
   ☐ 12-23 months
   ☐ 24-35 months
   ☐ 36 months or longer

3. **Current Duty Position?** _____ (e.g., Gunner, Team Leader, Squad Leader)

4. **Time in that Duty Position?**

   ☐ Less than 12 months
   ☐ 12-23 months
   ☐ 24-35 months
   ☐ 36 months or longer

5. **Time in service (including prior service)?**

   ☐ Less than 2 years
   ☐ 2-5 years
   ☐ 6-10 years
   ☐ 11-15 years
   ☐ 16-20 years
   ☐ more than 20 years

6. **What is your MOS/Branch?** _____

7. **Have you ever been deployed?**     Yes ☐     No ☐

   If yes: ☐ Combat Deployment     ☐ Non-Combat Deployment