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Leader Development in Army Units

Views from the Field

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Summary

Army leaders believe that a very significant contribution to their leader development comes from their experience in operational assignments. Yet there are few studies that indicate whether Army units even have leader development programs, and if they do, what the programs consist of and how well they are executed. The Center for Army Leadership (CAL) asked RAND Arroyo Center to help the Army identify effective and feasible leader development programs in operational units.

Hundreds of Officers Participated in the Study

Over 450 officers met with teams of Arroyo researchers during the summer and fall of 2006 to discuss leader development in Army units. The Arroyo teams met with officers at the Army War College (AWC), National Defense University (NDU), the National Training Center (NTC), the Command and General Staff College (CGSC), and five captains' career courses (CCCs). The CCCs that were chosen represent combat arms (armor, infantry, and engineer), combat support (chemical), and combat service support (combined logistics) branches.

A total of 405 officers up through the grade of major completed a written questionnaire that inquired about the leader development activities in their last operational assignment. After completing the questionnaire, those officers participated in half-hour discussions with the Arroyo teams. The 61 participating colonels and lieutenant colonels did not complete a written questionnaire but participated in longer discussions, often lasting two hours. During these discussions we shared

some of the results from the questionnaires completed by the more junior officers. Table S.1 provides a summary of the source and rank of the participating officers.¹

Table S.1
Number of Participating Officers by Experience Level and Source

Experience Level	Source	Number of Participating Officers
Junior Captains	Armor CCC	108 students
	Infantry CCC	92 students
	Chemical CCC	14 students
	Engineer CCC	25 students
	Combined Logistics CCC	43 students
	<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>282 junior captains</i>
Majors/ Senior Captains	CGSC	74 students
	NTC	29 O/Cs
	Armor CCC	10 small group instructors
	Infantry CCC	9 small group instructors
	Chemical CCC	1 small group instructor
	<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>123 majors/senior captains</i>
Colonels/ Lieutenant Colonels	NDU	13 students 1 faculty member
	AWC	19 students
	NTC	8 O/Cs
	Assigned to DC area	20 officers
	<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>61 colonels/lieutenant colonels</i>
Grand Total		466 officers

¹ The written survey did not ask officers to provide their rank, because we assumed that all students at the CCCs would be captains. However, we did observe among the respondents a few lieutenants (fewer than ten). The responses of these officers are included in data characterized as coming from the junior captains, because their presence at the CCCs indicated imminent promotion to captain and they had experience very similar to that of their fellow students.

Participating officers had extensive and recent operational experience. Almost all of the junior captains—the students at the CCCs—were platoon leaders in their last assignment, and a large percentage were deployed. Most of the majors and senior captains were company commanders in their last assignment, and, again, a large percentage were deployed. Almost all of the colonels and lieutenant colonels were recent brigade or battalion commanders, and half had deployed.

Twenty-three of the junior captains and eleven of the majors and senior captains had last served in a National Guard or U.S. Army Reserve unit. Their questionnaire responses and discussion comments were very similar to those of the active component officers. All are presented together in this monograph. Separating the responses of reserve component officers from those of active officers would have minimal impact on the tables and figures and no impact at all on the conclusions and recommendations. Nothing in the data gives reason to believe that the leader development activities within reserve component units are significantly different from those in active component units, although a larger sample of the former would be required before one could draw definitive conclusions.

There Is No Standard Leader Development Program

All units conduct training on a host of collective and individual tasks, but activities intended to develop the broader range of leadership skills vary greatly in content, frequency, and perceived quality. In short, there is no set of activities that could be characterized as a standard or typical unit-level leader development program. Table S.2 shows the percentage of officers who said they participated in various leader development activities in their last operational assignment. Even a required activity, such as keeping a written self-development plan and reviewing it with the rater, is not done consistently across units. In addition, leader development programs are not all-or-nothing: Units that do one type of activity, such as prescribing required reading, do not necessarily do another, such as conducting staff rides. The variation is due to several

factors—unit roles and missions, location, geographical dispersion, unit readiness, and, most important, the unit commander.

Table S.2
Percentage of Officers Who Participated in Various Unit-Level Leader Development Activities

Activity	Majors/ Senior Captains	Junior Captains
Commander discussed requirements of upcoming assignments and expectations to a very great extent	23	16
Rater discussed leadership skills at least once a quarter	60	69
Senior rater discussed leadership skills at least once a quarter	34	40
Commander encouraged officers to find a mentor or to mentor others	52	51
Required to have a written self-development plan	28	39
Required to review self-development plan with rater(s)	21	30
Leadership lessons generally embedded in training	68	75
Led or participated in an OPD class focused on leadership at least quarterly	49	56
Required to do professional reading focused on leadership qualities and lessons	28	41
Unit had a reading list	30	33
Unit conducted a staff ride off base	46	34

NOTES: Numbers show percentage of *officers*, not percentage of *units*, who participated in these activities. OPD = officer professional development.

Besides Actual Experience, Role Models and Personal Interaction Are Most Valued by Junior Officers

On the questionnaire, the majors and captains were given a list of twelve activities and were asked to select the three that were most effective in developing them as leaders. Both groups ranked the twelve items almost identically. Figure S.1 shows how junior captains ranked the items. Items at the top of the list can be lumped into two categories—operational experience and personal interaction. These are clearly more valuable to the officers than are the activities that might comprise a formal leader development program, such as staff rides or reading lists.

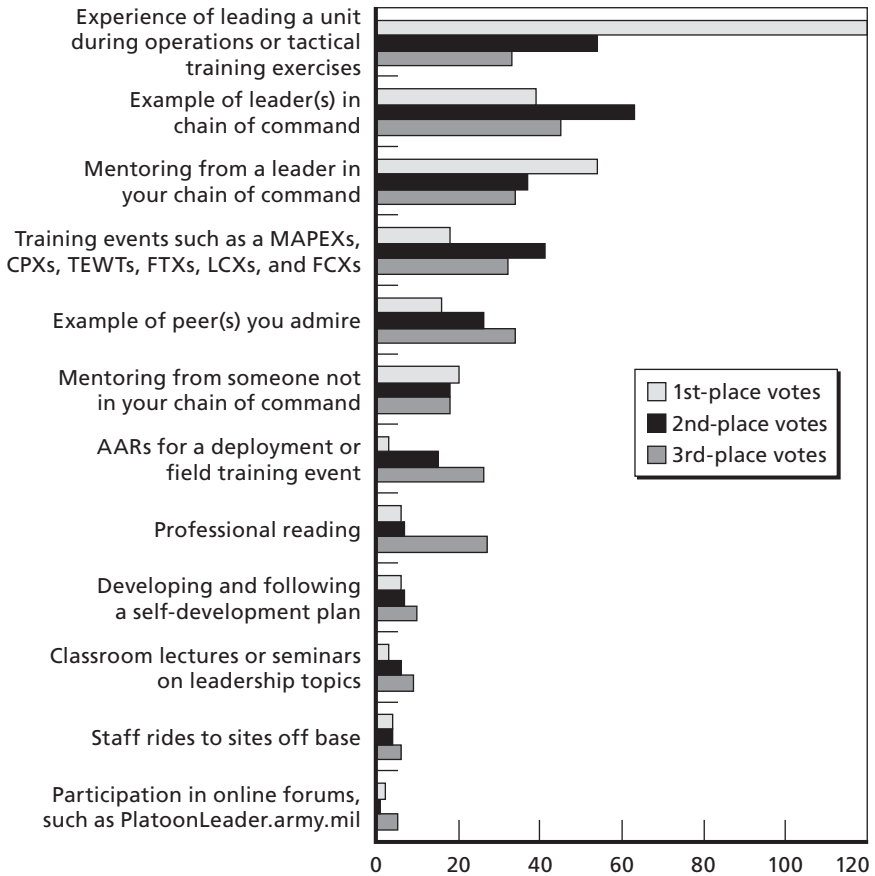
Unit Commanders Are the Key to Effective Leader Development

Junior officers commonly have more than one battalion commander, and certainly more than one company commander, during a three-year assignment. The changes in command can have a profound effect on the content, frequency, and perceived quality of leader development activities. Unit leaders—especially battalion and squadron commanders—have a significant influence on the development of junior officers.

Unit commanders' decisions about what to do for leader development are constrained by a number of factors, including deployments, the roles and missions of the units, unit location and geographical dispersion, readiness levels, and the amount of individual and team experience. To respond to these factors, a number of senior officers said it would be helpful to have a flexible “tool kit” of leader development ideas.

More important, unit commanders affect leader development as role models, mentors, and counselors. As Figure S.1 shows, these are among the factors junior officers believe are most effective for leader development. Still, there is a widespread perception among junior officers that the quality of this personal interaction varies greatly depending on the unit commanders' personalities and their capacities to develop leaders.

Figure S.1
Junior Captains' Ranking of Effectiveness of Leader Development Activities



NOTES: MAPEXs = map exercises, CPXs = command post exercises, TEWTs = tactical exercises without troops, FTXs = field training exercises, LCXs = logistical coordination exercises, FCXs = fire coordination exercises, and AARs = after action reviews.

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Because of the enormous effect of unit commanders on leader development activities, the questionnaire instructed respondents to “answer the rest of the questions about your experience *within the command climate that most strongly encouraged leadership development*

within your former unit.”² To the extent that respondents were able to make this distinction when completing the questionnaire, their responses present a best-case scenario of how often activities take place and how much they focus on and affect leader development.

Counseling Is Inconsistent

The colonels and lieutenant colonels disagreed somewhat with the majors and captains about the value and frequency of counseling, coaching, and mentoring in operational assignments. Many senior officers insisted that counseling, coaching, and mentoring occur more often than the junior officers think, perhaps because they frequently take place on an informal basis. The senior officers may have been conscious of the example they set while they were brigade and battalion commanders and would consider that a form of mentoring or counseling, whereas junior officers might not. But junior officers do recognize that informal interactions are a forum for counseling or mentoring and provide valuable developmental opportunities. Furthermore, even the senior officers frequently said they had not received high-quality counseling more than a few times throughout their own careers.

What is not in dispute is the fact that the Army’s Developmental Support Form (Department of the Army [DA] Form 67-9-1a) is not widely used as required. Many of the junior officers said they had never seen one, or had filled it out on their own but never reviewed it with their rater or senior rater. But a number of unit commanders create their own developmental support forms for use by the junior officers in their units.

Senior as well as junior officers generally had difficulty describing what a junior officer’s self-development program should entail. But junior officers desire to improve their leadership skills, and many mentioned informal efforts such as role modeling, self-evaluation, and reflection. More consistent counseling, part of an ongoing process

² In this document, all emphasis in quotations from the survey is from the original.

of leader development, is another important way to encourage self-assessment and growth.

Recommendations

Imposing formal programs, new forms, or reporting requirements on unit commanders is unlikely to be beneficial. Instead, our recommended strategy is to build on a process that already takes place, in which officers learn to do leader development from role models and peers. We were told by many officers, across all ranks, that people “need to see what right looks like.” This approach is the basis for our two key recommendations.

Use TRADOC Institutions to Raise Expectations for Leader Development in Units

Unit commanders, one senior officer said, need to leave the schoolhouse with ideas of how to do leader development. Counseling is one area in particular where Army schools can address several deficiencies in the current system. Counseling should emphasize adherence to a formal process with a fixed schedule for counseling sessions; instructors should help students prepare a developmental support form in anticipation of upcoming duties; and instruction should emphasize the developmental—as opposed to the administrative—aspects of counseling subordinates. Everything should reinforce to the students that this is what they should expect of themselves and their raters when they are in operational units.

The keys to this approach are teaching students through example and establishing expectations for behaviors that embrace the idea of the Army being a teaching as well as a learning organization. If instructors and faculty ensure that students are exposed to formal, personalized, developmental counseling, officers will be more likely to take their experience and expectations back to the unit and teach others by example. This is what happened when U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) institutions—the maneuver combat training centers—introduced after-action reviews (AARs). The same

could happen with leader development by showing officers what right looks like in the schoolhouse, and by exposing them to information and ideas that they can take to their units.

Promote a Collaborative Environment for Sharing Ideas and Tools That Support Leader Development

Senior officers strongly stated that they need to have flexibility in adapting activities to unit circumstances and their own strengths and experiences. Accordingly, many expressed interest in having a selection of tools and activities that they can apply as needed.

Many of those tools and activities have already been designed by leaders throughout the Army. Unit commanders share their knowledge and resources, but they tend to do it within their own group of friends and professional acquaintances. One role for TRADOC organizations should be to promote wider and more systematic peer-to-peer sharing of best practices. The Center for Army Leadership can support this initiative by compiling and organizing leader development materials from commanders and making them centrally available. Other shared information could be a compilation of vignettes and success stories. There must be some quality control on the resources that are shared, but the burden need not fall entirely on CAL. There are examples from Web-based companies of how to “democratize” quality control by letting the users themselves rate and review resources. These resources and information should be available to the field, but they are likely to be most useful to students in Army schools, particularly those preparing for company, battalion, and brigade command. It may be particularly important that resources are shared with students at earlier stages in their careers, such as AWC and NDU students sharing with pre-command course students, or CGSC students sharing with CCC students.