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Empowerment of American Noncommissioned Officers

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Abstract

Throughout time, the duties and responsibilities of the American noncommissioned officers have undergone a great transformation of empowerment for numerous reasons. The three most significant aspects of technology, education, and social evolution however, are responsible for the greatest impact. We have adequately prepared our NCOs to the best extent possible. The process of employing new systems and newfound experience leads to the identification of new, more capable systems and revised doctrine, requiring further adaptation. We are thus constantly out of synch and probably always will be. This creates even more need for hierarchical layers as task organization changes.

Empowerment of the American Noncommissioned Officer

Throughout time, the duties and responsibilities of the American noncommissioned officers have undergone a great transformation of empowerment for numerous reasons. The three most significant aspects of technology, education, and social evolution however, are responsible for the greatest impact. Why these three? First they are inherently intertwined, and synergistic in nature. Second, they have the effect of changing the very face of battle, and hence the manner in which Soldiers are employed and fight. Third, they are cyclical in nature. A change or advancement in one of these three areas has the effect of modifying another factor. In turn, the battlefield is modified, and the process starts over. For someone to say that the role of the noncommissioned officer (NCO) has changed is not untrue, but it is inaccurate. The reality is that the role has *evolved*, and the end result is an NCO with both greater authority and responsibility than ever before.

Technology

Because the three factors are entwined, we could easily begin our discussion with any one of them. However, since technology is not only the most significant factor; but probably also the most obvious, it's a good place to start. First compare the level of military technology available to the American Revolutionary Soldier, to the Soldier of World War I. Then compare the level of technology used by that "doughboy" to that of the Soldier in World War II or currently fighting today. Recall, that in the early formation of the American Revolutionary Army, Congress hired private owners to form companies of Soldiers. Officers were directly responsible for training their Soldiers and did so through empowering the most experienced and senior Soldiers by promoting them to corporals and sergeants, to whom they in turn delegated the task of training drill and the manual of arms.

Although that dynamic has not changed, advances in technology have led to more sophisticated individual weapons and equipment as well as unit and crew-served weapons systems. This in turn pushes more responsibility to be technically and tactically proficient upon the mid-level managers (NCOs.) An infantryman for example, must now have the sophistication to operate a Global Positioning System (GPS), a satellite communications radio, or a MK-19 machinegun. He must have the knowledge to operate and maintain systems such as a vehicle, Electronic Countermeasure Systems (ECMs), or electronic battlefield management systems such as the Blue Force Tracker. Likewise, this paradigm doesn't just apply to Army combat arms. The same is true of Navy sonar-men, Air force aircraft mechanics, or Army water purification specialists. As each field has become more specialized, so must the technical knowledge base for the NCOs both operating these systems and responsible for training and supervising Soldiers operating these systems. While an officer cannot delegate responsibility, the military as an institution has pushed the onus of responsibility further along the chain. Hence, the officer is further removed from the individual Service member and left with absolutely no choice but to empower the NCO Corps with greater authority.

Education

For a considerable period of time, possibly since our military's inception through the mid 1980's, the single largest distinguishing factor between the officer and enlisted corps was education. Officers were those with degrees, enlisted were those without. That is still generally true today, proven by the fact that officers are required to either have a degree or complete a degree with-in a certain time frame. The Department of Defense does not however, require enlisted Soldiers to have a high school diploma. However, that gap is closing and a larger gray area exists. Advances in technology, as discussed previously, have also led to the need for higher

levels of institutional training apart from civilian education. This in turn has created two dynamics. First, while the officer is more removed from the technological training of an enlisted member, he is thus closer to the NCO, and a greater bond of trust ensues, at least in this regard. Greater trust results in greater levels of empowerment. Second, a “chicken-egg” model incurs; “ask a lot of your Soldiers, (because now you can) and they will give you a lot.” Conversely, if you give a lot, a lot more will be asked for. As one of Murphy’s Laws of Combat states, “Take more than your fair share of objectives, and you will be given more than your fair share of objectives to take.” Education plays a huge role.

Social Evolution

The fact that the military mirrors society is no hidden secret. Often times, it seems to lag behind in terms of social norms; e.g. racial segregation, gay rights, environmental policies, etcetera, but the fact is, that as our civilian culture evolves, so does our military’s. In terms of technology, the military or quasi-military programs and research such as NASA or nuclear energy respectively, or heavily influenced areas overlapping into the civilian sector such as medicine, have led the way. The direct impact is obvious. A black officer or NCO would have been practically unheard of 200 years ago. Perhaps this is more of an argument towards the empowerment of African Americans and women, but not entirely. The military employs a higher percentage of minorities than the civilian sector, thus this fact says something about the military institution as a whole. It is a government entity that, by statute, empowers everyone equally. Secondly, the goods valued in society, such as a vehicle instead of a horse, or electricity over a candle, are also valued by the military. The cycle continues, and the military becomes more technologically complex yet again. Additionally, as mentioned before, technological advances in the military in terms of medicine or spaceflight cause revolutions in the civilian sector.

The indirect impact is not so obvious. We are a society moving out of the industrial age and into a service rather than goods based economy. Our society is shifting its focus from what it supplies, to whom it supplies. A sociologist or social scientist might surmise that a level of social unconsciousness exists; one that simply values people more than it did in the days of coal mines, large factories, and non-existent labor laws. A greater focus on people in society means greater value on individuals in the military as well. This is clearly evidenced by our greater emphasis on the individual Soldier's survivability in terms of body armor, vehicle armor and other forms of protection. A higher value placed on people undoubtedly leads to greater levels of empowerment.

The Changing Face of Combat

As mentioned in the introduction, these three factors: technology, education, and social evolution, have lead to a change in how we fight our modern wars. Soldiers are more physically removed from the proximity of their commanders due to the invention of vehicles and Blue-Force Trackers. Unit's can operate more autonomously with the advent of radios and GPSs. We shouldn't forget that we don't evolve in a vacuum either. The enemies we face use modern technology to employ insidious devices such as remote controlled Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs.) So as the battlefield evolves, so does our technology to meet new threats, as well as our employment of Soldiers. The cycle begins to repeat itself.

Conclusion

Have we adequately prepared our NCO's for this ever-increasing encumbrance? The answer is both yes and no. The adjustments we make come in the form of quanta. There really is no spectrum in this regard. Technology in a particular field might change, creating a need for better institutional training or education. For a short time, perhaps we are unprepared. We

employ the Blue Force Tracker, but it takes time to train NCO's on its use. However, in the process of employing the system, experience, either through actual use in combat or institutional training, leads to the identification of a new, more capable system. Intellectually as a group, we've overshot the technology. To say that we're not adequately prepared as an NCO Corps is a misnomer. To say that we are out of synch is a more accurate description, and with global trends showing that mankind currently doubles its intellectual database every two years, we probably always will be. The fact that the number of ranks within the NCO Corps has grown is a direct result of this shift towards the future; i.e. the need for more layers as task organization changes. Although there is only speculative discussion about adding an E-10 pay-grade, the simple mention of it adds further weight to this theory. The empowerment of the NCO will continue to grow as sure as technology, educational growth, and societal norms and values continue to evolve.

References

None