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Improving Enlisted Soldier Role Transition to Noncommissioned Officer: Challenges and Ways Forward

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14. ABSTRACT *(Maximum 200 words)*:
Recent research has indicated that the transition from junior enlisted Soldier to noncommissioned officer (NCO) is often daunting, as Soldiers face challenges in professional, personal, and social domains. The purpose of this research was to identify challenges and barriers to a successful transition and to identify successful strategies NCOs employed to navigate the transition. We examined the academic and military literature and doctrine related to leader development to inform study design, instrument development, and data interpretation. We conducted focus groups and interviews with 76 Soldiers and NCOs about their personal role transition experiences. We also obtained questionnaire data from 157 Soldiers and NCOs to quantify experiences in this transition phase. Results suggest that many prospective and junior NCOs struggle with confidence, motivation to lead, and basic leadership skills. However, junior enlisted leaders generally report that they acquire the necessary skills, self-confidence, and leadership identity in the course of performing their required duties as leaders. Together, the results suggest that earlier exposure to these leadership activities along with encouragement, feedback, and support from leadership may accelerate and ease the transition process for many NCOs.

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IMPROVING ENLISTED SOLDIER ROLE TRANSITION TO NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER: CHALLENGES AND WAYS FORWARD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research Requirement:

Noncommissioned officers (NCO) are the backbone of the U.S. Army, and continually building the next generation of NCO leaders is an essential component of meeting current and future mission requirements. Recent research has indicated that the transition from junior enlisted Soldier to NCO is often daunting, as Soldiers face challenges in professional, personal, and social domains. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to identify challenges and barriers to a successful transition and to identify successful strategies NCOs employed to navigate the transition.

Procedure:

We conducted focus groups and interviews with 76 Soldiers and NCOs about their personal experiences, asking them about experiences in the times leading up to the transition; as they were in the midst of the transition; and after having established themselves as leaders. We also obtained questionnaire data from 157 Soldiers and NCOs to quantify their expectations and experiences in this transition phase. We analyzed the data using rigorous mixed method techniques.

Findings:

Results suggest that many prospective and current junior NCOs struggle with confidence, motivation to lead, and basic leadership skills. However, junior enlisted leaders generally report that they acquire the necessary skills, self-confidence, and leadership identity in the course of performing their required duties as leaders. Together, the results suggest that earlier exposure to these leadership activities along with encouragement, feedback, and support from leadership may accelerate and ease the transition process for many NCOs.

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 targeted research to address challenges encountered by prospective and recently promoted enlisted leaders within the Army. Future research can extend these results into important areas such as provision of feedback and leader development. Future research can be leveraged to develop tools, job aids, or training resources to support the junior enlisted leader transition process to ensure successful assumption of the duties and responsibilities of first-line leadership. The research supports *The Army People Strategy* (Department of the Army, 2019), specifically Line of Effort 2: *Develop Talent to identify employment, education, and training opportunities which will extend their talents, close talent gaps, and maximize their contributions to the Total Army*, as well as many other current guiding documents for the Army.

IMPROVING ENLISTED SOLDIER ROLE TRANSITION TO NONCOMMISSIONED
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Improving Enlisted Soldier Role Transition to Noncommissioned Officer: Challenges and Ways Forward

Following the conclusion of large-scale operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the focus of the U.S. military has largely shifted from counterinsurgency, asymmetric threats, and nearly continuous deployments to multi-domain combat operations, hybrid warfare, and extended time spent in garrison preparing for future engagements. These operating environments place very different demands on Soldiers than those they faced in the previous two decades. The noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps bears a large responsibility in managing and preparing for these demands as they are charged with leading, training, and taking care of the largest portion of the U.S. Army, enlisted Soldiers.

Recent accounts have indicated that the Army is experiencing challenges in filling vital direct leadership positions and is working to alleviate those shortfalls (U.S. Army, 2017; U.S. Army, 2018). The Army's compelling interest in filling these positions is clear as those leaders, while being the most junior in the hierarchy, have the most direct impact on their Solders and so are critical to daily operation and training of the Army. However, an unintended consequence of efforts to ensure that there are NCOs for these billets is that Soldiers may be promoted before they are fully equipped to successfully perform the full range of duties and responsibilities required in these roles. Therefore, it is critical for the Army to understand the challenges that junior NCOs face as they assume new roles and responsibilities so the organization can work toward providing solutions which allow them to more rapidly and successfully become capable junior leaders. The purpose of this research was to examine the transition process from Soldier to NCO in order to identify challenges or barriers to a successful transition (such as new NCOs' expectations and frustrations as young leaders) and recommend solutions to address these challenges.

Factors Affecting Leader Development and Learning

Leader development research is conducted in a wide array of disciplines and contexts. While military leadership comprises only a small portion of this knowledge base, much of the research from other contexts applies at least some degree in the Army context. The broader leader development has often focused on individual characteristics or attributes related to effective leading, which is not the focus of this research. However, there has been some research relevant to role transition including study of the impact of prospective leaders' readiness to learn and motivation to lead. There is also existing research on training methods suited to cultivating the leaders tailored to fit organizational needs.

Growth Mindset

Prospective leaders' openness to learning and honing leadership skills depends on their mindset. Individuals with a *growth mindset* believe they can learn new skills or knowledge (Dweck, 1986). Thus, a prospective leader with a growth mindset about leadership ability is likely to respond more positively to training that encourages them to see themselves as leaders. Providing examples of leaders who were successful as a result of training is also likely to increase their motivation to learn and develop as a leader. Johnson, et al. (2018) found that junior

leaders who believe they can learn new skills and competencies exert more effort and ultimately perform better than those who believe that they are not likely to improve. Further, showing junior leaders that they can learn to lead will have a positive impact on their learning and performance (Avolio & Hannah, 2008). In contrast, young leaders who have a *fixed performance mindset*, that is, they do not believe that leadership can be learned, may avoid leadership education programs (Savani & Zou, 2019), thus stagnating their development.

Motivation to Lead

An important indicator of an individual's possible emergence as a leader is whether that person actually wants to lead others. The *motivation to lead* refers to the willingness of a leader (or prospective leader) to take on leadership training, roles, and responsibilities (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). The motivation to lead affects the extent to which junior leaders succeed in becoming effective leaders (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Chan et al., 2000). A prospective leader's motivation to lead impacts whether the individual seeks or avoids opportunities for advancement and leadership development (Chan & Drasgow 2001; Hong, Catano, & Liao, 2011; McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982; Van Iddekinge et al., 2009). Motivation to lead is typically dynamic as situations and personnel change. However, given the above, having a strong baseline motivation to lead is likely integral to both functioning and growth of leaders across time.

Leader Identity

Prospective leaders who embrace the transition to leadership do not just have the desire to be leaders—they also come to identify as leaders (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Forming an identity as a leader motivates and supports leadership development (Day & Sin, 2011). Having an identity as a leader can motivate new leaders to seek developmental experiences and opportunities for deliberate practice of desired leadership skills and competencies. A strong leadership identity also motivates leaders to act like a leader, for instance, setting goals, giving direction, providing feedback, etc. Therefore, one's leader identity is strengthened as one acts like a leader and receives positive reinforcement for leadership (Day & Sin, 2011; DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

To craft a leadership identity and transition to a leader role, one must establish a new self-identity (Snook et al., 2010). During this process, new leaders will have many novel experiences. They will manage change processes, execute strategy, and communicate with people within and outside their direct control. They will also diagnose situations in order to delegate and develop others. These new roles and new behaviors shape their new professional identity as leaders. During the transition process, people conceive of themselves in relation to their old and new roles through processes of separation, transition, and incorporation. These transition processes are facilitated by factors such as (a) developmental readiness; (b) transitional time and space (e.g., opportunities during training to explore, or to try new behaviors without consequences, and receiving feedback to better judge others' reactions and the outcomes these behaviors produce); (c) guides and reference groups, which allow for social comparison (i.e., points of reference and reflected appraisals); and (d) pre- and post-formal program experiences (recognizing that preparation and follow-up are necessary for transfer of training).

The transition process—the shift in identity from team member to leader—may be incremental or dramatic depending on whether the organization expects and rewards the leader's individual contribution and/or leader behaviors (Maurer & London, 2018). Leader development occurs as new leaders are exposed to new ideas, knowledge, and perspectives, stretching their capabilities as they test and gain insight into their potential. They learn from sharing stories, collaborating with others across functions, seeking challenges, and taking risks. Learning occurs as they are exposed to stretch goals, developmental job assignments, risk tolerance, and failure-tolerant leaders. Further, their self-identity as leaders increases as they learn and perform competencies that they associate with leadership—that is, they see themselves as leaders when they behave like leaders and receive positive feedback to signify that this is appropriate leadership behavior (Kragt & Day, 2020). Identity typically emerges from feelings that one is making progress, which evokes passion for the role and strengthens the centrality of the role in one's identity. There will be a stronger association between progress and passion for the role when the individual exerts effort (Tripathi et al., 2020). Active engagement in the role during training is important in ensuring that the junior leader experiences progress, feels more passionate about the role, and develops a stronger role identity. Moreover, a growth mindset promotes active engagement and learning. Indeed, a leader likely benefits from being open to the idea of "being wrong", processing feedback mindfully, and using the feedback to make progress (London, 2015).

The transition to leadership can be further bolstered if prospective leaders have role models with whom they can compare themselves and derive a sense of self-efficacy for leadership (an "I can do it too" feeling) and a stronger motivation to lead (Guillén et al., 2015). This connection can be made through asking the junior leaders to identify a leader who has had (or still has) an influence on them. The junior leaders are then asked to consider the leader's skills and abilities and how they are similar to that leader. Such an approach can strengthen leadership self-efficacy and the motivation to lead (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Andersen et al., 1995; Aron, Aron, Tutor, & Nelson, 1991), and the approach can provide junior leaders with the feeling of being equipped to lead (Ritter & Lord, 2007; Kark & Dijk, 2007).

Gaining a Sense of Control and Power

Recent research has shown that the psychological experience of control is important for (a) reducing leader stress, (b) facilitating leadership behaviors (particularly in high-stakes, stressful situations), and (c) reinforcing one's desire to be a leader. For example, a study of military officers and government officials found that leaders' stress was lower when they had a greater sense of control (Sherman, et al., 2012). Compared with non-leaders, leaders had lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol and reported lower levels of anxiety. This was particularly true for higher-level leaders. A sense of control mediated the relationship between leadership level and anxiety. Specifically, higher leadership level predicted a greater sense of control, which in turn, predicted lower anxiety.

Another study found that the generalized sense of power—the belief that one is able to influence others in one's various social relationships—served as a psychological resource that enabled leadership in high-stakes, unfamiliar group challenges, such as emergencies or crises (Sherman, et al., 2019). The authors studied current and prospective humanitarian aid

professionals during a major field training exercise: a three-day, immersive simulated humanitarian crisis. Individuals who entered the simulated crisis with a greater sense of power in their social relationships experienced lower stress (anxiety), behaved more assertively, and left the simulation with a relatively heightened desire to lead. Lacking an initial sense of power was associated with experiences, such as feeling timid, that undermined the desire to lead. These results suggest that the psychological sense of power is a key leadership resource, without which one may be at risk of self-selecting out of leadership.

Role of NCOs in Preparing Future Leaders

One of the NCO corps' most critical roles is to prepare future generations of enlisted leaders. Team leaders typically have the most direct influence on the extent to which potential leaders among their Soldiers actually acquire the values of a leader, develop a motivation to lead, and begin to see themselves as future leaders. The extent to which prospective or new leaders succeed in this transition process—in developing an identity as a leader—will depend on the extent to which they identify with the group's current leaders and see those leaders as examples of what the organization expects (Van Dijke & De Cremer, 2010). Part of a leader's role is to inculcate the organization's values in the group. This process will be more successful when team members, some of whom may become leaders, identify with the leader (Grille et al., 2015). Team members will identify with and acquire the same values as leaders who support them through giving feedback and providing direction for successful performance (De Cremer et al., 2010). Conversely, if team members see themselves as different from their leader, they may observe other leaders with whom they identify.

Mentorship within the Army, and more specifically within the NCO Corps, has always been an important component of leader development. The Army Mentorship Handbook (U.S. Army Headquarters Department of the Army, Deputy Chief of Staff G1, 2005) offers information and guidance to both the mentor and mentee. The handbook defines mentorship as, "The voluntary developmental relationship that exists between a person of greater experience and a person of lesser experience characterized by mutual trust and respect." Although a mentor can exist within a mentee's chain of command, it is recommended that they are kept separate. The Army believes that in establishing a mentorship relationship, the organization as whole will benefit due to improved performance, improved communication, and leader development of individual mentees. Advantages for the mentee also include more confidence in their leadership abilities, having a sounding board, better career satisfaction, and greater productivity. There is no time limit for a mentorship relationship. Rather, it is based on needs and expectations. When the needs and expectations are met, the mentorship does not necessarily end, but is dependent on the mentor-mentee's expectations and further goals. Though the Army Mentorship Handbook does not specify when a Soldier should have a mentor, it does lay out that a mentee should select a mentor who is two ranks or positions higher, is a role model, is perceived as a strong leader to others, and is in the same career field (U.S. Army Headquarters Department of the Army, Deputy Chief of Staff G1, 2005). The handbook also suggests that those who select mentors tend to be much more successful in their careers. A key to this handbook is the enclosure titled *Individual Development Action Plan*, which includes critical items such as short-term goals (1–6 months), near term goals (6–24 months), long term goals (24+ months), attributes, skills, and competencies.

Despite the importance of role models and mentorship in leader preparation, it appears that these may not be as consistently available in the Army today as would be ideal. The Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership found that, from 2006-2010, "Develops Others" was the lowest rated Army Leader Core Competency (Hinds & Steele, 2012). Even though respondents recognized the importance of self-development, only 40% of the leaders agreed that their units provided time for development. The survey identified toxic leadership—self-absorbed and self-promoting leaders who are more concerned with meeting their own goals than the goals of the organization and their subordinates—as another key problem. This finding suggests that many Soldiers did not have positive leaders to serve as role models and reinforce their commitment to the Army. A stronger emphasis on providing feedback, through formal (e.g., multisource assessment) or informal (on-the-spot feedback) means, could help leaders see how they are viewed by their peers and co-workers. More consistent focus placed on facets of leader development, such as providing feedback, serving as role models, training leaders to coach and receive coaching, and providing training resources, can show junior leaders that leader development is a priority within the organization.

Enlisted leader preparation processes provide many opportunities for practice, feedback, and mentorship. Formal NCO training and education through the Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System (NCOPDS), while extremely important in preparing new leaders, is not the only input for NCOs to develop as leaders. In practice, much of the growth of leadership acumen for NCOs is likely to happen as they conduct their daily duties. They have much more time and opportunity to actually lead, receive feedback about their leading behaviors, and make adjustments to those behaviors through this experiential, though informal, process. In addition, they will also have the chance to learn vicariously as they observe others perform as leaders around them, be they peers or more senior leaders. Generally, as junior leaders test their capabilities and deal with the stress of training, they learn what the Army expects of NCOs and gain a sense of their ability to influence and direct team members. This reinforces their self-confidence and strengthens their motivation to lead. As a result, their identity transitions from Soldier and team member to NCO and leader.

Implications for the Current Research

Leadership and leader development literature covers a wide array of disciplines and contexts. While military leadership comprises only a small portion of this knowledge base, much of the research from other contexts can extend to the Army context. The broader leader development literature investigates many individual characteristics and aspects directly relevant to role transition including study of the impact of prospective leaders' readiness to learn and motivation to lead. Review of the literature shows that among prospective leaders, those who most successfully transition into leadership roles tend to (a) believe that leadership can be learned (i.e., a growth mindset), (b) have a strong motivation to lead, (c) have developed an identity as a leader, (d) be self-confident, and (e) believe that they can influence others. The literature also highlights the importance of formative experiences and feedback as strong components of leader development and preparation. The main goal of this work was to translate, what is largely a body of knowledge consisting of research from outside of the Army context, to identify the most critical aspects of early leader development through the lens of enlisted leader role transition. The end goal is to provide recommendations for how the Army can leverage the

outcomes from this research to enhance and strengthen the role transition process for emerging enlisted leaders.

Method

Participants

In total, one hundred and fifty-seven (157) U.S. Army Soldiers from three installations in the continental United States participated in this research. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 53 years ($M = 27.32$, $SD = 5.69$) with ranks ranging from Specialist to Command Sergeant Major. Of note, the data collection took place in two phases. This split collection was the result of limitations and restrictions put in place due to the advent of COVID-19. Participants at the first two installations completed surveys and participated in focus groups or interviews. At the third location, which occurred after a delay of six months, participants were only able to complete surveys remotely as the restrictions in place prevented other interactions.

All participants used in the analysis reported previous promotion or selection for promotion to an NCO. Informed consent (Appendix A) was obtained from each of the participants before any data were collected and all were verbally given the same study introduction script (Appendix B). We assigned NCO/leader participants to focus groups to ensure a mix of diverse leadership experiences.

Design

Data that were obtained from each in-person participant occurred through a one and a half to two-hour, semi-structured, focus group session. Focus groups were conducted with individuals of similar rank with three to four researchers present. Some volunteers also participated in individual interviews. Researchers took field notes during all sessions. Additionally, focus groups and interviews were digitally recorded (if all participants consented) as a means of accurately capturing all relevant information. Each focus group session was moderated by an experienced senior researcher.

Materials

Informed Consent Form

An informed consent form (Appendix A) was given to all participants before the study began. Each participant was asked to read and sign the informed consent form, as well as to ask any questions they had pertaining to the study. All personally identifying information from this form was kept secure and anonymous to prevent participants from being linked to study data.

Leadership Transition Questionnaire

We developed a Leadership Transition Questionnaire (Appendix C) for this study. The survey took participants approximately 10 minutes to complete. Each question was rated by the participants on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at All) to 5 (Very Much). Questions from this

survey emphasized various leadership experiences at different times in an individual's military career (e.g., before, during, and currently). We used the key in Appendix D to further analyze participant data for each of the items elicited from this survey.

Demographic Form

We administered a Demographic Form (Appendix C) and used it to collect data from each participant. Examples of data collected from this survey were age, rank/MOS, and highest level of education achieved, along with leadership experiences to determine if any of these factors impacted the transition process.

Survey Measures

All multi-item measures were averaged to form a composite score unless otherwise specified. Each item was rated by the participants on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at All) to 5 (Very Much). The Demographic Form took approximately five minutes to complete and was attached to the Leadership Transition Questionnaire. Questions from this survey emphasized various leadership experiences at different times in an individual's military career (e.g., before, during, and currently). The measures and individual items are presented below.

Self-confidence. The average of the following four items: "When I was first promoted to a leadership rank, I wasn't sure I knew how to be a leader" (reverse-scored); "During my leadership training, I became more confident in my ability to lead"; "During my first leadership assignment, I felt confident that I could handle the responsibilities of being a leader"; and During their experiences as a first-time leader, one of the biggest sources of stress was "feeling like I was not ready to be a leader" (reverse-scored).

Social Influence. The average of the following three items: During their experiences as a first-time leader, one of the biggest sources of stress was "gaining the trust of my soldiers" (reverse-scored); "During my experiences as a leader, I worried that my team wouldn't respect my decisions" (reverse-scored); and "During my first leadership assignment, my Soldiers seemed to be testing my leadership" (reverse-scored).

Decision-making Autonomy. The average of the following three "I was allowed to use my personal initiative or judgment in carrying out the work"; "I was allowed to make a lot of decisions on my own"; and "My position provided me with significant autonomy in making decisions."

Leader Identity: Adoption of New Role as Team Leader. The average of the following two items, "During my experiences as a leader, I saw myself as a leader"; "During my leadership training, I changed the way I view myself, from a Soldier to a leader."

Leader Identity: Separation from Old Role as Team Member. The average of the following two items: "During their experiences as a first-time leader, one of the biggest sources of stress was separating my role as a leader from my role as a Soldier" (reverse-scored); and

"When I was first promoted to a leadership rank, I worried that I would miss being one of the troops" (reverse-scored).

Opportunities for Learning. Assessed with the following three items, analyzed separately and in aggregate (as average): "During my leadership training, I had opportunities to practice being a leader"; "During my leadership training, there wasn't enough time to process all the new information I was being taught" (reverse-scored); and "During my experiences as a leader, I was encouraged to pursue opportunities to develop as a leader outside of required training."

Received Feedback from Leaders and Mentors. The average of the following four items: "When I was first promoted to a leadership rank, my leaders were excellent role models"; "When I was first promoted to a leadership rank, I had a mentor who guided me"; "During my experiences as a leader, my leaders provided me with feedback that helped me develop as a leader"; and "During my experiences as a leader, I received frequent feedback from my leaders."

Desired Feedback from Leaders. The average of the following three items: "During my experiences as a leader, I asked my leaders for feedback and advice"; "During my experiences as a leader, I was eager for my leaders to tell me how I was doing as a leader"; and "During my experiences as a leader, I wanted my leaders to tell me how I could improve as a leader."

Awareness of Army Expectations. Assessed with the following question: "At this point in time, I know what the Army expects from its leaders."

Growth Mindset. Assessed with the following item: "Before I was promoted to a leadership rank, I believed that leadership was something that could be learned."

Fixed Mindset. Assessed with the following item: "Before I was promoted to a leadership rank, I believed that a person's leadership ability is something that can't be changed much."

Growth vs. Fixed mindset. To compute the relative belief in leadership as learned (vs. fixed), each participant's score on the fixed mindset item was subtracted from their score on the growth mindset item, yielding a single score, with higher values indicating a greater relative belief that leadership is learnable.

Desire to Lead. The survey assessed both *pre-promotion desire to lead* ("Before I was promoted to a leadership rank, I had a strong desire to be a leader") and *current desire to lead* ("At this point in time, I have a strong desire to be a leader").

Focus Group and Individual Interview Protocols

We designed semi-structured focus group protocols (Carey, 1994) to guide the interactions in qualitative data collection sessions. The constructs covered in these protocols were derived from key concepts identified in the literature review and from previous research.

Protocols are included in the appendices of this report (Appendix E, Appendix F, and Appendix G).

Procedure

Before each focus group and interview, participants were provided with an overview of the project objectives and informed of the purpose for the interview. They were told that the intent of this research was to better understand their transition experience. They were each given an informed consent statement and had the opportunity to choose not to participate.

We used both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data that described the challenges associated with the transition from Soldier to NCO/leader. First, participants completed a questionnaire on role transition expectations and experiences, along with some demographic information. Once the questionnaires had been completed, collected, and secured, we began the focus groups and individual interviews. Each focus group was moderated by an experienced research analyst from our team. The 90-minute focus group was structured as a Cognitive Task Analysis (CTA), based on Klein and Armstrong (2004). CTA is the process of understanding a team's or an individual's cognitive needs and demands during a task. CTA provides a set of tools for eliciting and representing general and specific knowledge pertaining to an activity. The purpose of using CTA methods was to elicit an understanding of the "cognitive map" that guides NCOs in their transition process. Employing CTA allowed us to understand many of the cognitive aspects involved in the leadership transition process, which are critical in an operational environment. An effective session drew upon the participants' attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and reactions to their individual transition process. The transition accounts we heard provided salient examples of both challenges and solutions. In addition to the recorded discussions, we also maintained field notes during the session. All records of the focus groups were stored on a government-provided computer.

In addition to the focus groups, individual interviews were conducted. The end state of these interviews was to obtain a first-person description of a salient experience and lessons learned in pictures and words. Additionally, the narratives were another data source that helped to support gap and requirements analyses.

Analysis

After the completion of the focus groups and individual interviews, the digital voice recordings were transcribed. We compiled field notes and converted them into Word and Excel documents. The researchers who were present at each interview analyzed notes from all interview transcripts and retrieved qualitative data regarding the challenges of the NCO transition process as well as the strategies for making the process more effective. The qualitative data were then divided into positive and negative comments and classified by the participants' rank. Participants' terms and phraseology were retained to ensure the results would reflect the combined voice of the NCOs. The data from the transcript analysis were combined into a master list. In next phase of this analysis, the responses were grouped according to similarity through a card sort process as outlined by Nielsen (1995). Multiple raters performed the sorting to ensure accurate analysis of data. The cards were categorized by similar theme, task, characteristic, and

rank. The sorted data were then further examined to identify the key challenges and opportunities most commonly reported as having a significant impact on the initial role transition.

For the quantitative data, paper survey responses were entered into a data file for computational analysis. Descriptive statistics and correlations were used to analyze the survey responses. Simultaneous linear regression models (with simple slopes analysis used to decompose statistically significant interactions) and mediation models (indirect effects with bootstrapped confidence intervals) were computed to examine how predictor variables (e.g., decision-making autonomy) related to outcome variables (e.g., desire to lead).

Results

Demographic Results

Participants were first asked to provide us with their current rank, which were divided into three groups: (1) promotable, (2) junior NCO, and (3) senior NCO. Individuals in the promotable group were specialist (SPC)/corporal (CPL), and sergeants (SGT) and staff sergeants (SSG) were recorded as junior NCOs. Participants placed into the senior NCO included sergeants first class (SFC), master sergeants (MSG)/first sergeants (1SG), or sergeants major (SGM)/command sergeants major (CSM). In this sample, junior NCOs occupied the largest portion of participants ($n = 87$), the promotable group contributed the second largest ($n = 61$), and finally, the senior NCOs constituting the smallest group ($n = 9$).

Demographic data was further analyzed according to participants' ranks and locations. In our sample, SPCs ($n = 49$) and SGTs ($n = 62$) significantly outnumbering other ranks, at 31.2% and 39.5%, respectively. Furthermore, 46.5% of participant data were collected remotely ($n = 73$). Participant MOSs encompassed 12 career management fields (CMF), with the armor/cavalry CMF ($n = 60$) comprising the most represented group in this sample.

Next, we analyzed the data by rank and years of service as well as by location and years of service. The largest group of participants reported having completed 2-4 years of service ($n = 69$). As expected, SPCs ($n = 38$) and SGTs ($n = 20$) fell within the 2-4 years of service group. Of those who completed 5-6 years of service, SGTs were the majority ($n = 27$). Overall, nearly two-thirds of the participants completed between 2 and 6 years of service ($n = 103$).

The demographic survey also asked participants to list duty positions that they have held since joining the Army. Table 1 gives an overview of the number of participants that held staff positions, the average length of time in those positions, and the average number of subordinates under their leadership. Positions listed were squad leader (SL, $n = 80$), team leader (TL, $n = 121$), section leader ($n = 59$), and staff noncommissioned officer in charge (NCOIC) ($n = 23$). On average, the longest held position was squad leader at 18.4 months with team leader and section leader positions held for less time at 17.2 months and 16.6 months, respectively. The position with the largest number of subordinates was staff NCOIC.

Table 1

Count, Duration, and Number of Individuals Lead While in Staff Position(s)

Position	Count	Average Duration (months)	Average # of Individuals Under Leadership
Squad Leader	80	18.4	6
Team Leader	121	17.2	4
Section Leader	59	16.6	9
Staff NCOIC	23	11	11

According to the data in Table 2, a significant portion of the participants (*n* = 121) reported their highest level of education received as a high school degree/GED, but 8 of the 9 senior NCOs that participated in this study reported having college-level degrees. Participants were asked to report any previous leadership position held outside of the Army. Another aspect associated with emerging junior leaders is leadership roles in other contexts. Interestingly, 46 of the 157 individuals reported having been a sports team captain for at least one team, which was the largest group compared to any other leadership positions. Furthermore, 25 participants reported holding leadership positions such as shift managers or supervisor, 15 reported having joined Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC), and 17 reported various other leadership roles such as club presidents or boy scouts.

Table 2

Highest Level of Education by Rank

Level of Education	Rank							
	SPC	CPL	SGT	SSG	SFC	MSG/ 1SG	SGM/ CSM	Total
High School/GED	36	10	50	24	1	0	0	121
Associate Degree	7	2	7	1	3	0	0	20
Bachelor's Degree	5	0	4	0	0	2	2	13
Master's Degree	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	3

Focus Group Results

Inputs from participants were organized into issues of concern, impact, opportunities, and recommendations to improve the transition. The most common examples cited by participants included dealing with leadership, managing relationships, the disconnect between training the participant felt they needed and the training they received along with balancing work and family responsibilities. Advice on means to address identified challenges were used construct summaries of the recommendations for improving the transition process according to each rank grouping. These tables include examples of aggregated exemplar quotes reflecting the participants' responses during the focus groups. The summary tables are located in Appendix H.

Preliminary Analysis of Leadership Survey

Overall Means

The means of the primary variables are presented in Figure 1. A few patterns are worth noting. First, participants much more strongly endorsed the idea that leadership can be learned ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.05$) than the idea that leadership is a fixed trait ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.11$), $t(155) = 12.54$, $p < .001$. Second, the average participant's current desire to lead was significantly higher ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.89$) than their reported desire to lead before being promoted to a leadership rank ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.90$), $t(156) = 3.04$, $p = .003$ (though both means were quite high). Third, on average, participants reported desiring feedback ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.69$) to a greater extent than they received feedback ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.86$), $t(156) = 6.24$, $p < .001$.
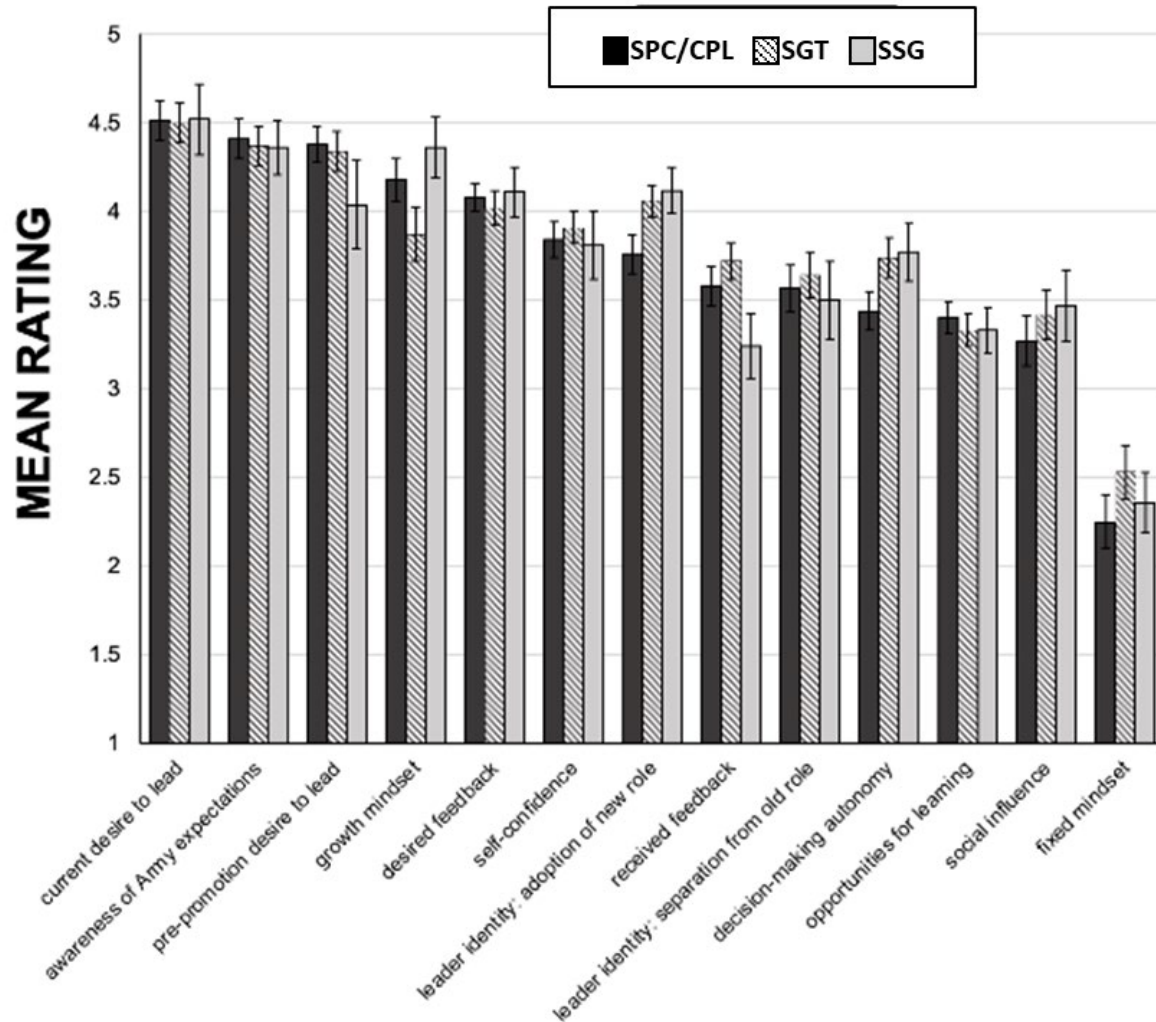
Figure 1

Overall Means for Primary Measures
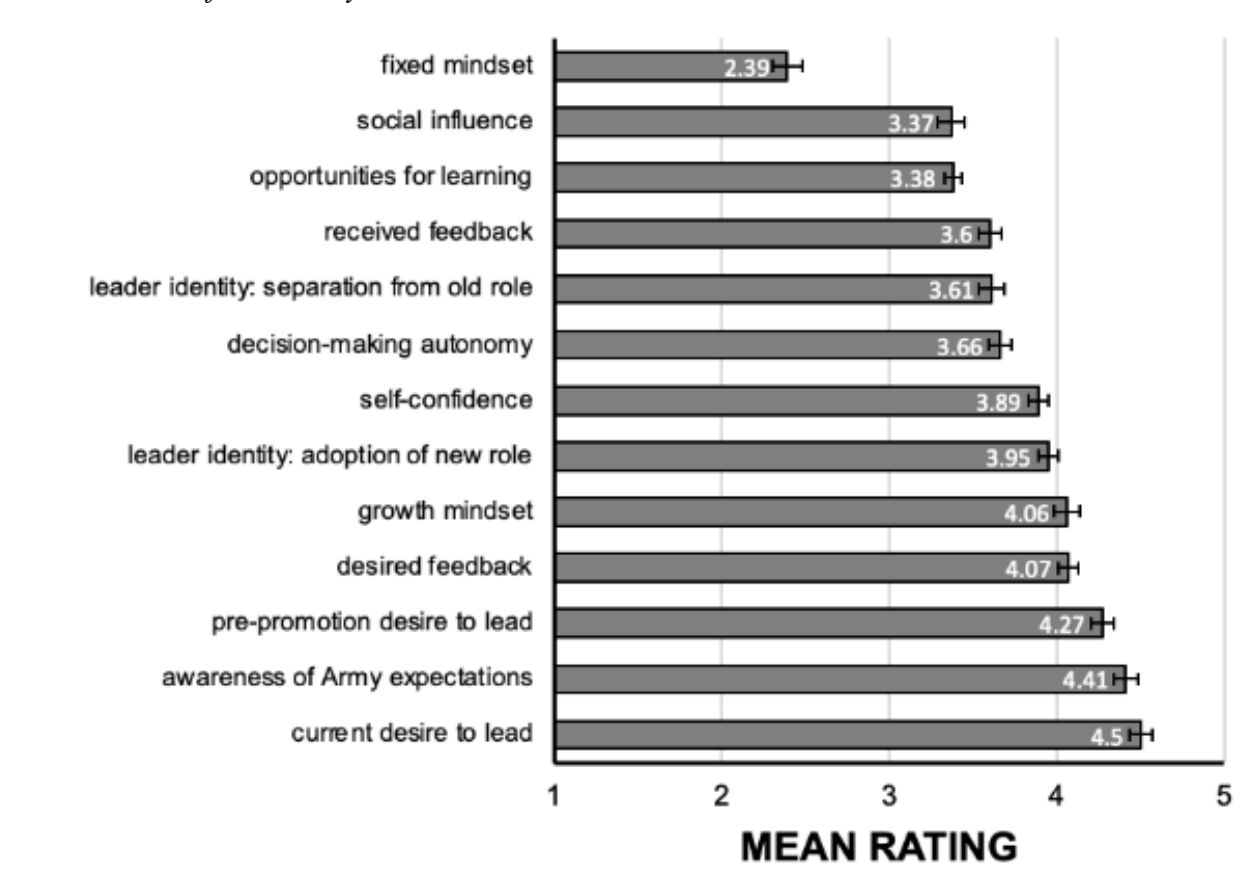
Note. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error of the mean.

Figure 2

Means by Rank (SPC/CPL, SGT, and SSG)

Note. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error of the mean.

Table 3

Correlations Among Primary Variables

| Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Age	—													
2. Pre-promotion desire to lead	-.10	—												
3. Current desire to lead	.11	.46***	—											
4. Awareness of Army expectations	.01	.29***	.51***	—										
5. Growth mindset	-.01	.18*	.17*	.09	—									
6. Fixed mindset	.04	.06	.06	-.10	-.20*	—								
7. Self-confidence	.03	.36***	.21*	.22**	-.08	.05	—							
8. Social influence	.04	-.10	-.18*	.00	-.06	-.17*	.31**	—						
9. Decision-making autonomy	.20*	.17*	.37***	.34***	.18*	-.02	.24**	.11	—					
10. Identity transition	.05	.42***	.41***	.25**	.12	.03	.36**	-.07	.38***	—				
11. Identity separation	.08	.17*	-.02	-.01	-.11	-.02	.47**	.43**	.15	.05	—			
12. Opportunities for learning	.09	.10	.24**	.16*	.10	.04	.03	-.14	.30***	.25**	-.02	—		
13. Received feedback	-.04	.12	.25**	.23**	.06	.02	.19*	.07	.39***	.26**	.03	.32***	—	
14. Desired feedback	.11	.17*	.37***	.23**	.14	-.06	.11	-	.41***	.42***	.07	.39***	.27*	—

Note. $^*p < .05.$ $^{**}p < .01.$ $^{***}p < .001.$

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Mean Differences by Group (Promotable SPC/CPL, Junior NCO, and Senior NCO)

      Figure 3 presents means by group: promotable SPC/CPL ($n = 61$), junior NCO ($n = 87$), and senior NCO ($n = 9$). Not surprisingly, decision-making autonomy increased with increasing rank ($F[2,154] = 4.22$, $p = .016$, $\eta_p^2 = .052$): senior NCOs reported greater decision-making autonomy than junior NCOs who reported greater decision-making autonomy than the promotable group.

Figure 3

Means by Group
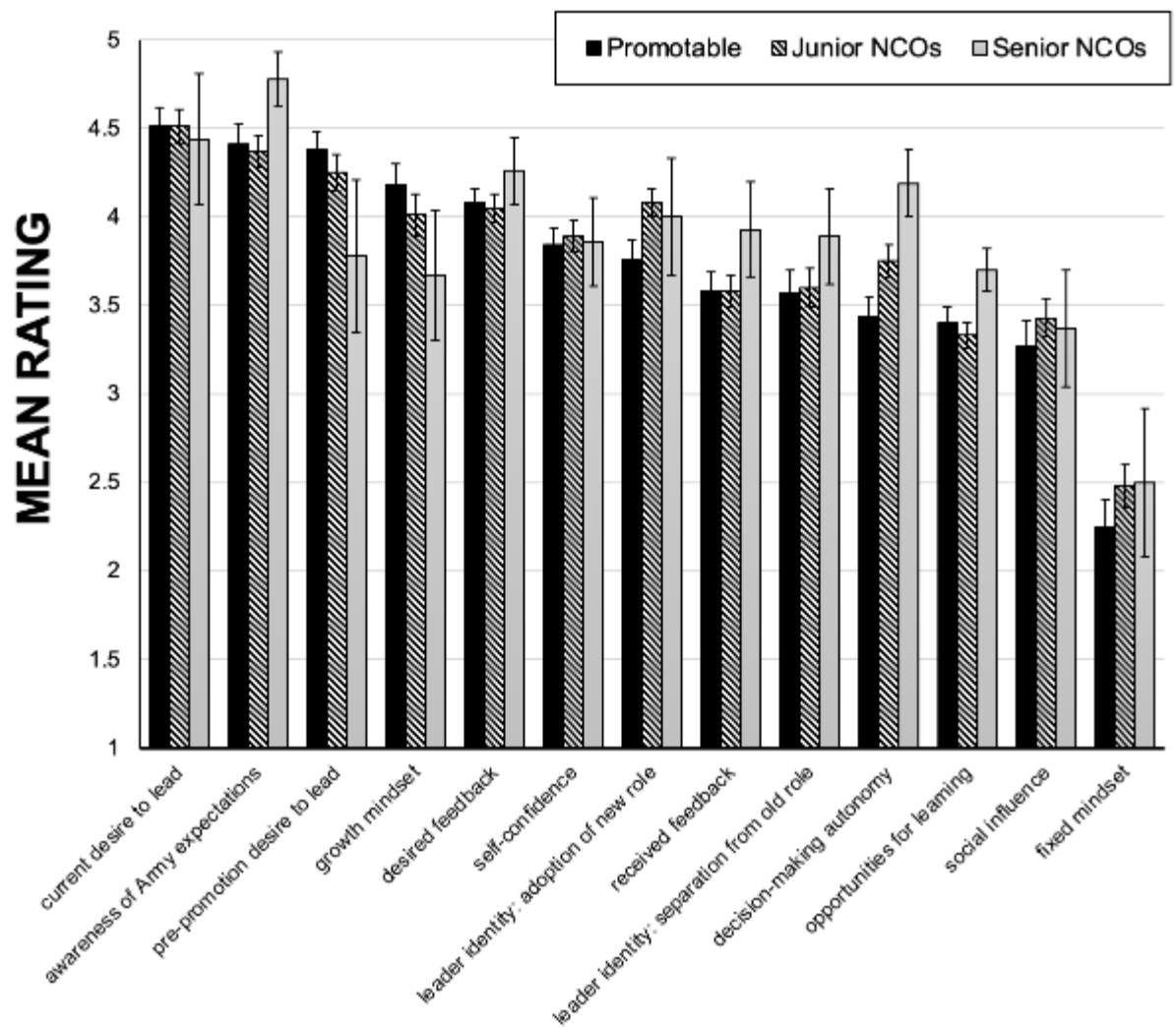
Note. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error of the mean.

Figure 4 focuses more closely on the leader identity transition variables by group. Notably, the junior NCOs seemed to have successfully adopted a leader identity (they reported identifying as leaders as much as senior NCOs). However, they reported less success separating from their old role as team member. Specifically, junior NCOs identified as a leader to a greater extent than did the promotable group, $F(1,154) = 3.63$, $p = .019$, $\eta_p^2 = .035$, but did not report greater success separating from the old role as team member, $F(1,154) = .02$, $p = .89$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$. As a result, junior NCOs displayed a sizeable gap between these two components—they were more successful at identifying as a leader ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .71$) than they were at separating from their old role as team member ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.03$), $t(86) = 3.65$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.39$. Analysis of potential mediators revealed that the difference between the promotable group and the junior NCOs in adoption of the new leader role was explained by their greater decision-making autonomy (indirect effect: B = .11, SE = .06, 95% Confidence Interval [CI]: [.01, .24]). Junior NCOs reported greater decision-making autonomy than the promotable group, B = .31, $p = .03$, and greater decision-making autonomy was associated with greater adoption of the leader role, B = .34, $p < .001$.

Figure 4

The Two Leader Identity Transition Processes (Adoption of New Role and Separation from Old Role) by Group
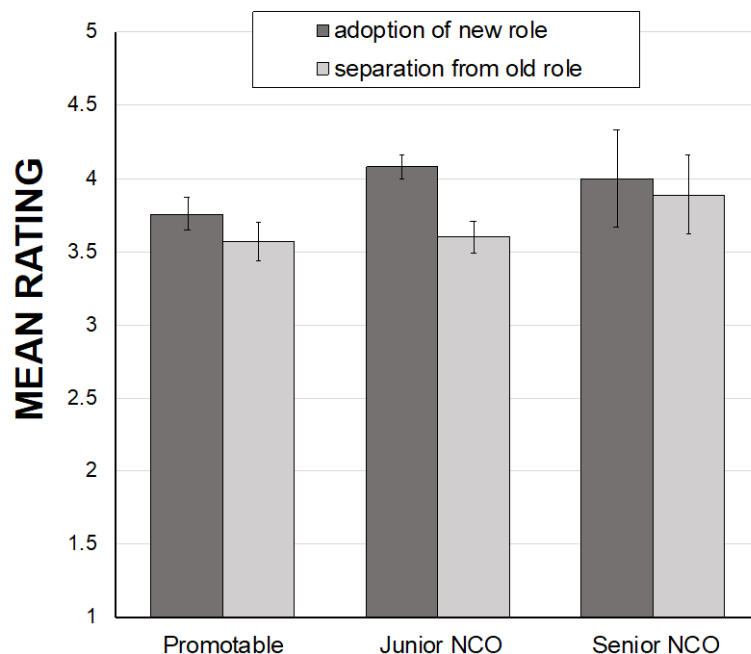
Note. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error of the mean.

Primary Analyses of Leadership Survey: Key Factors under Army Control and What They Predict

All analyses below include all participants. Unless otherwise noted, prior leadership experience, which was included as a control variable in many analyses, refers to the number of leadership positions that the participant has held in the Army (as TL, SL, section leader, or staff NCOIC). Dummy-coded variables representing group membership—whether the Soldier was in the promotable (SPC and CPL), junior NCO (and SSG), or senior NCO (SFC, MSG, 1SG, SGM, and CSM) group—were included as control variables in many analyses. In regression analyses, all significant interactions were decomposed using simple slopes analysis (Aiken & West, 1991), which tests the relationship between the predictor and outcome variable at specific levels of the moderator variable (e.g., 1 SD below the mean and 1 SD above the mean). For all mediation models, indirect effects (the test of mediation) were computed using bootstrap confidence intervals (5,000 samples, PROCESS 3.5, Hayes, 2017).
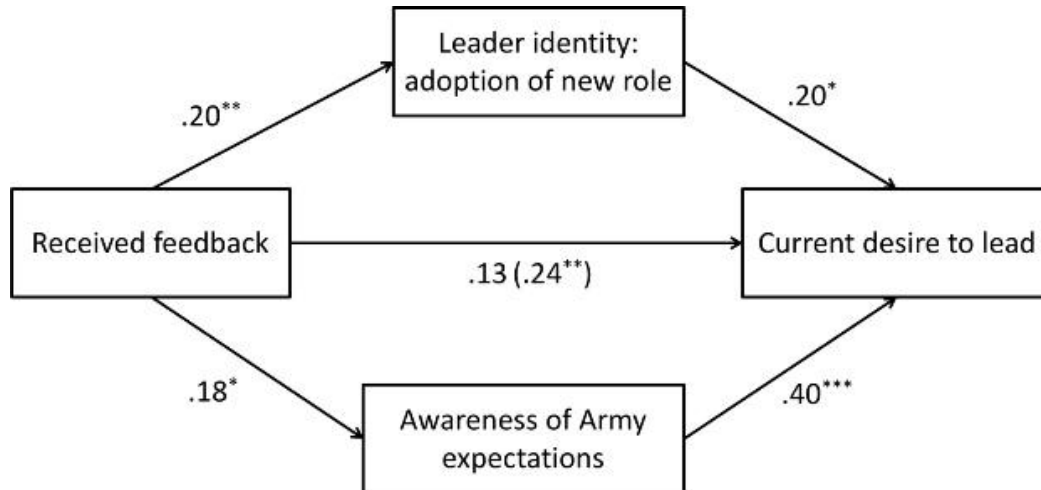
Feedback from Leaders

The extent to which participants reported receiving feedback from their leaders positively predicted a boost in their desire to be leaders (current desire controlling for pre-promotion desire), B = .24, p = .002. This relationship was explained by two factors: leader identity transition (adoption of the leader role) and knowing what the Army expects of its leaders. A multiple mediator model (Figure 6) revealed that the more participants received feedback from their leaders, the more they identified as leaders and the more they said they knew what the Army expects of its leaders. These two factors in turn predicted a greater current desire to lead. Overall, both factors were significant mediators of the relationship between receiving feedback and a heightened desire to lead (B = .04, SE = .026, 95% CI: [.003, .10] and B = .07, SE = .05, 95% CI: [.001, .19] for the indirect effects for leader identity adoption and awareness of Army expectations, respectively).

Moderation by desire for feedback. The above analyses show that receiving feedback positively predicts change in the desire to lead. But does this effect depend on whether the participant actually wants feedback? This question was examined by looking at the interaction between desiring and receiving feedback (in predicting change in the desire to lead). In a model predicting change in the desire to lead (including age, group, previous leadership experience, and pre-promotion desire to lead as covariates), there was a statistically significant interaction between desiring and receiving feedback (B = -.25, p = .002). This interaction is depicted in Figure 7. The interaction pattern suggests that being high on either factor (desiring or receiving feedback) was associated with an increase in the desire to lead. The only combination that was not associated with an increase in the desire to lead was neither desiring nor receiving feedback.
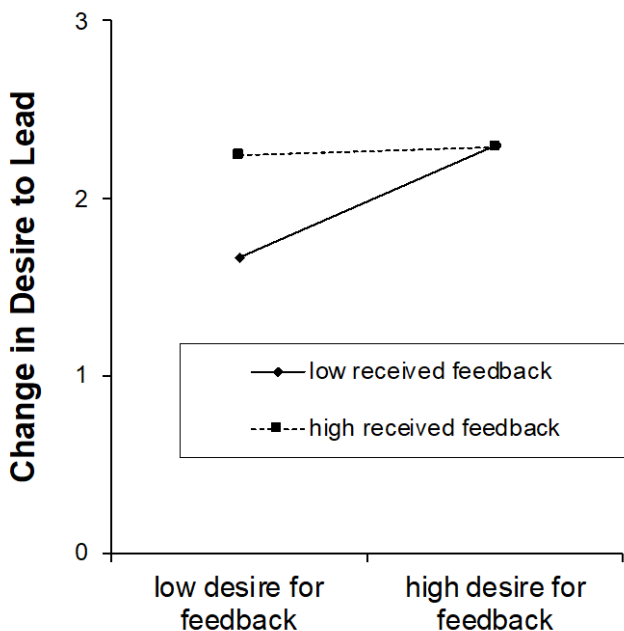
Figure 5

Awareness of Army Expectations and Adoption of New Role as Leader Mediate the Relationship between Receiving Feedback and Current Desire to Lead

Note. Controlling for pre-promotion desire to lead, age, group, and prior leadership experience. Coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients. *p* < .05, **p* < .01, ***p* < .001

Figure 6

Change in the Desire to Lead as a Function of the Desire for Feedback and the Receipt of Feedback
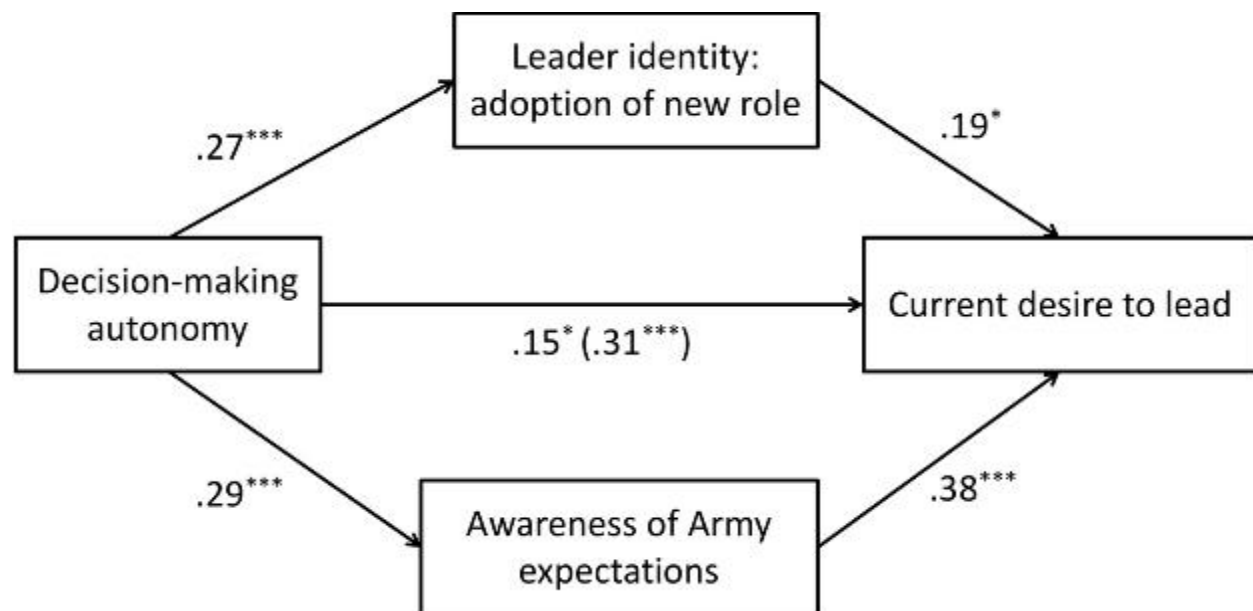
Decision-making Autonomy

Decision-making autonomy was similarly predictive of participants' current desire to lead. The extent to which participants reported having decision-making autonomy positively predicted a boost in their desire to be leaders (current desire controlling for pre-promotion desire), B = .31, *p* < .001. This relationship was explained, in part, by the same two factors that explained the relationship between receiving feedback and the current desire to lead: adoption of a leader identity and knowing what the Army expects of its leaders. The more participants were given decision-making autonomy, the more they identified as leaders and the more they said they knew what the Army expects of its leaders. These two factors in turn predicted a greater current desire to lead (see Figure 8). Overall, both factors were statistically significant mediators of the relationship between receiving feedback and a heightened desire to lead (B = .05, SE = .03, 95% CI: [.002, .12] and B = .11, SE = .06, 95% CI: [.02, .24] for the indirect effects for leader identity adoption and awareness of Army expectations, respectively).

Figure 7

Awareness of Army Expectations and Adoption of New Role as Leader Partially Mediate the Relationship between Decision-Making Autonomy and Current Desire to Lead


Note. Controlling for pre-promotion desire to lead, age, group, and prior leadership experience. Coefficients are unstandardized. **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001

Notably, decision-making autonomy mattered most for NCOs who reported that they had a relatively low desire to lead before they were first promoted (see Figure 9). That is, there was a statistically significant interaction between pre-promotion desire to lead and decision-making autonomy in predicting current desire to lead (B = -.16, *p* = .02). Decision-making autonomy was a significantly stronger predictor of current desire to lead for Soldiers low in pre-promotion desire to lead (1 *SD* below the mean), B = .44, *p* < .001, compared to Soldiers high in pre-promotion desire to lead (who answered 5 on the 5-point scale), B = .18, *p* = .04.

Figure 8

Current Desire to Lead as a Function of Pre-Promotion Desire to Lead and Decision-Making Autonomy
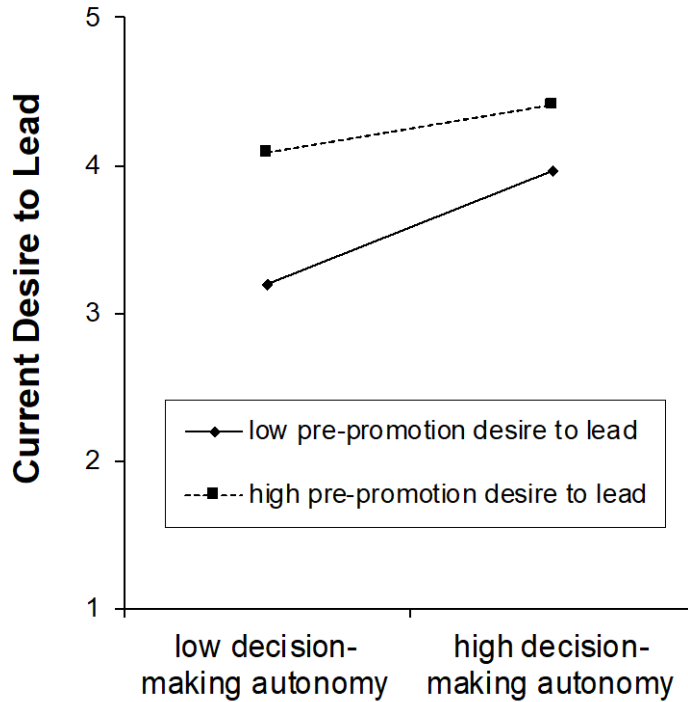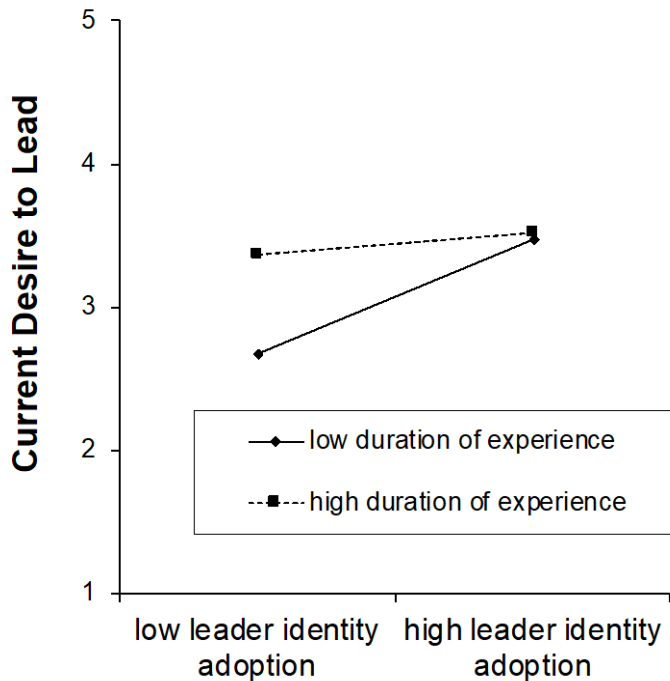

Note. Slopes are simple slopes from regression analysis. Controlling for age, group, and prior leadership experience.

Importance of previous leadership experience. The previous analyses show the importance of leader identity adoption for the motivation and desire to be a leader. Notably, this factor was most important for NCOs who lacked prior leadership experience in the Army. To create an index of such experience, the average duration of leadership experience in the Army (as TL, SL, section leader, and staff NCOIC) was computed. This variable significantly moderated the pathway from leader identity adoption to current desire to lead). That is, there was a statistically significant interaction between leader identity adoption and duration of Army leadership experience in predicting current desire to lead (controlling for pre-promotion desire to lead, age, and group), B = -.01, p = .004. This interaction is depicted in Figure 10. For those high in prior leadership experience (1 *SD* above the mean of the leadership duration variable), leader identity adoption did not significantly predict current desire to lead, B = .08, p = .52. However, for those with low levels of prior leadership experience (1 *SD* above the mean of the leadership duration variable), leader identity adoption was a statistically significant positive predictor of current desire to lead, B = .45, p < .001. This pattern suggests that the transition to a leader identity is most important for those NCOs who have not served as leaders in the Army for a significant period of time. Looking at the pattern of slopes further reveals that for predicting high levels of leadership motivation, NCOs needed *either* prior leadership experience or to have adopted a leader identity (but not necessarily both). NCOs who had neither leadership experience nor a leader identity showed the lowest motivation levels.

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Figure 9

Current Desire to Lead as a Function of Leader Identity Adoption and Duration of Army Leadership Experience

Note. Slopes are simple slopes from regression analysis. Controlling for pre-promotion desire to lead, age, and group.
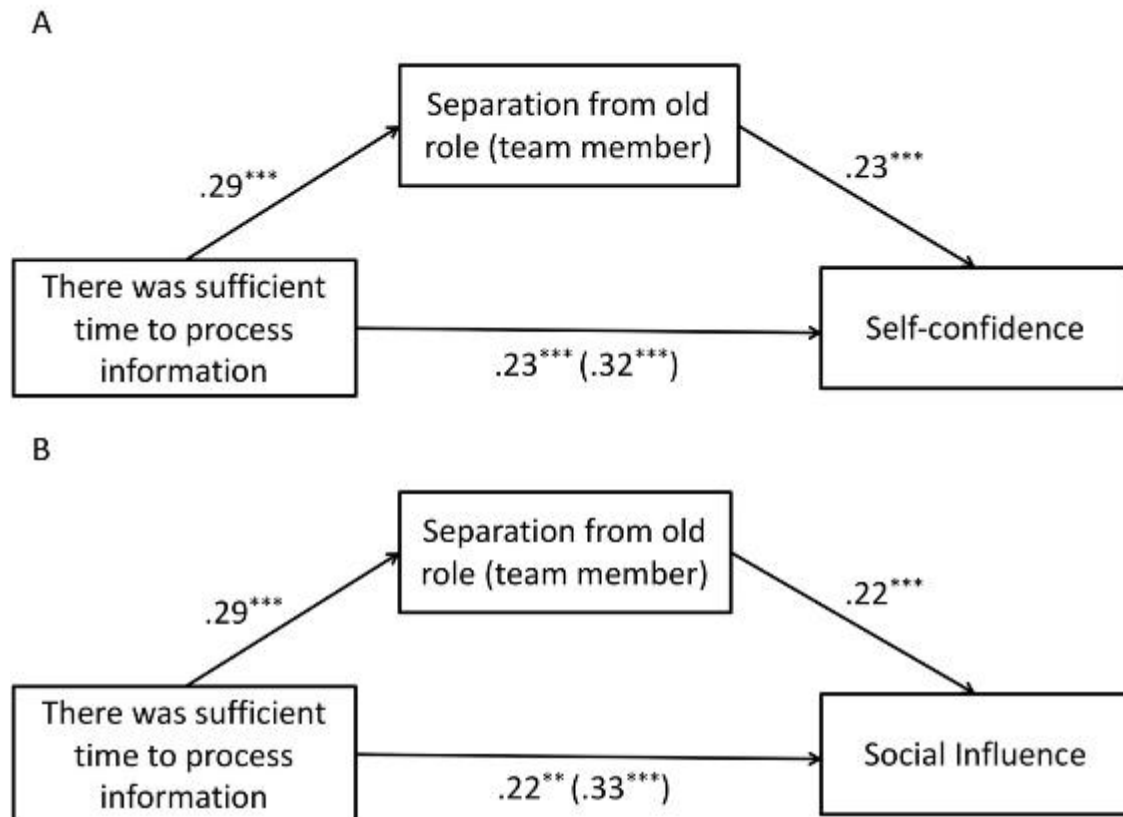
Opportunities for Learning

There was a divergence in how the three items measuring opportunities for learning related to the identity transition process. Feeling that there was sufficient time during training to process information predicted greater success separating from one's prior role as team member (r = .28, p < .001), but did not predict greater adoption of the new role as leader (r = .08, p = .33). It seems that it takes time for the new NCOs to relinquish their identity as a team member and that a rushed or overwhelming training may not allow sufficient time for this transition process to unfold. In contrast, feeling that one had sufficient time to practice being a leader was associated with greater adoption of the new leader role (r = .23, p = .005), but did not predict separation from the prior role as team member (r = .07, p = .39). Finally, feeling that one was encouraged to seek opportunities for leadership development outside of training was significantly related to both facets of the identity transition (r = .29, p < .001 for new role adoption; r = .16, p = .045 for separation from the old role as team member).

Time to Process Information during Training. The importance of having time during training to process information is illustrated by examining how this variable relates to two important outcome variables: self-confidence and perceived social influence (i.e., the belief that

one's team members respect and listen to them). Feeling that one had greater time to process information was a significant positive predictor of both outcomes and in each case, this relationship was explained, in part, by successful separation from the team member role (the indirect effects are B = .09, SE = .03, 95% CI: [.04, .14] for self-confidence and B = .11, SE = .04, 95% CI: [.05, .19] for perceived social influence). That is, as the two partial mediation models show (Figure 11A and 11B), feeling that one had sufficient time to process information facilitated greater separation from the NCO's prior role as team member, which in turn predicted greater self-confidence and perceived social influence.

Figure 10

Successful Separation from Old Role as Team Member Partially Explains Relationship between Time to Process Information and (A) Self-confidence and (B) Social Influence
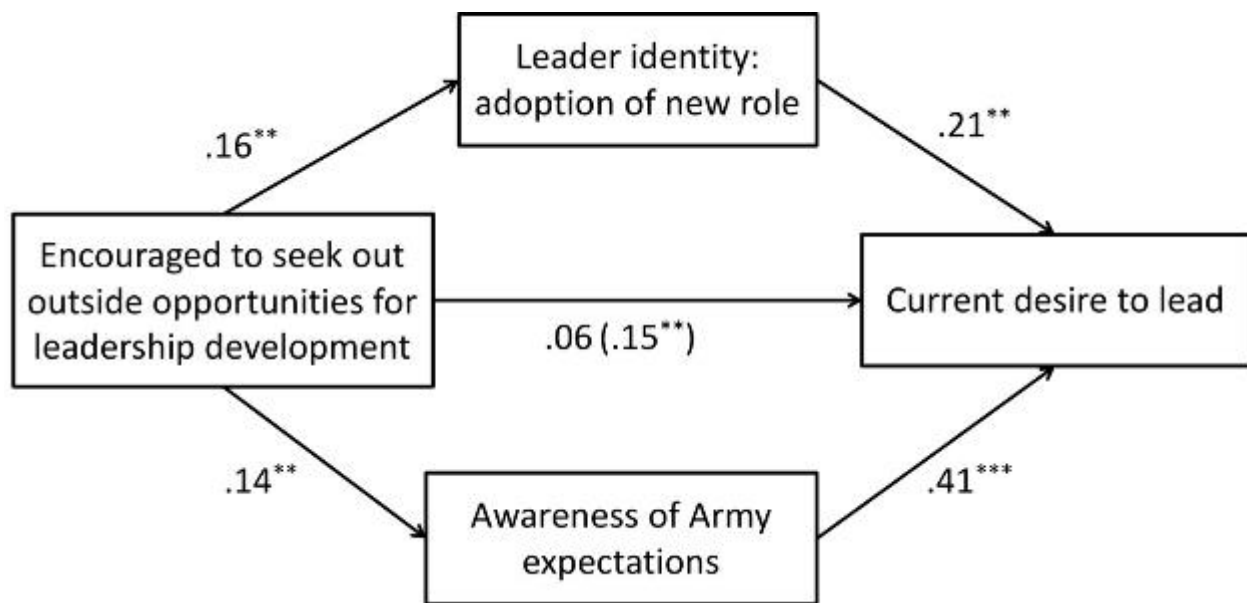
A

B

Note. Controlling for age, group, and prior leadership experience. Coefficients are unstandardized. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Encouraged to Seek Opportunities Outside of Training. Being encouraged to seek opportunities for leadership development outside of training was a positive predictor of a heightened motivation to be a leader (relative to the pre-promotion motivation). Much like receiving feedback and decision-making autonomy (as reported above—see Figures 4 and 6), this encouragement seemed to work because it facilitated the leader identity transition process

(adoption of the new leader role) and helped communicate the Army's expectations of its leaders. That is, the relationship between being encouraged to see opportunities for leadership development outside of training and a boost in the desire to lead was significantly mediated by these two factors (B = .03, SE = .019, 95% CI: [.003, .08] for adoption of the new leader role and B = .06, SE = .034, 95% CI: [.01, .14] for awareness of Army expectations). This partial mediation model is depicted in Figure 12.

Figure 11

Awareness of Army Expectations and Adoption of New Role as Leader Mediate the Relationship between Being Encouraged to Seek Opportunities for Leadership Development Outside of Training and Current Desire to Lead

Note. Controlling for age, group, prior leadership experience, and pre-promotion desire to lead. Coefficients are unstandardized. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Growth vs. Fixed Mindset

Believing that leadership is learnable and rejecting the idea that leadership is a fixed trait can be an advantage for a leader or prospective leader. We tested how a growth mindset and a fixed mindset (each mean-centered) interacted with awareness of the Army's expectations of its leaders to predict adoption of a leader identity (controlling for age, group, and prior leadership experience). This analysis revealed a statistically significant interaction between a fixed mindset and awareness of Army's expectations, B = -.24, p < .001. Knowing what the Army expects of its leaders was positively associated with greater adoption of a leader identity but only for Soldiers who rejected the idea that leadership cannot be learned. For Soldiers who viewed leadership as relatively more fixed (1 SD above mean), awareness of Army expectations was unrelated to adoption of a leader identity (B = -.03, p = .80). For Soldiers who viewed leadership as relatively less fixed (1 SD below mean), awareness of Army expectations was a statistically

significant positive predictor of adoption of a leader identity (B = .50, p < .001). As a result of this interaction, the Soldiers who were most likely to report seeing themselves as leaders were those who reported that they believed (before being promoted) that leadership ability was less fixed and who reported knowing what the Army expects of its leaders (see Figure 13).

Figure 12

Leader Identity Transition (Adoption of New Role) as a Function of Fixed Mindset and Awareness of Army Expectations
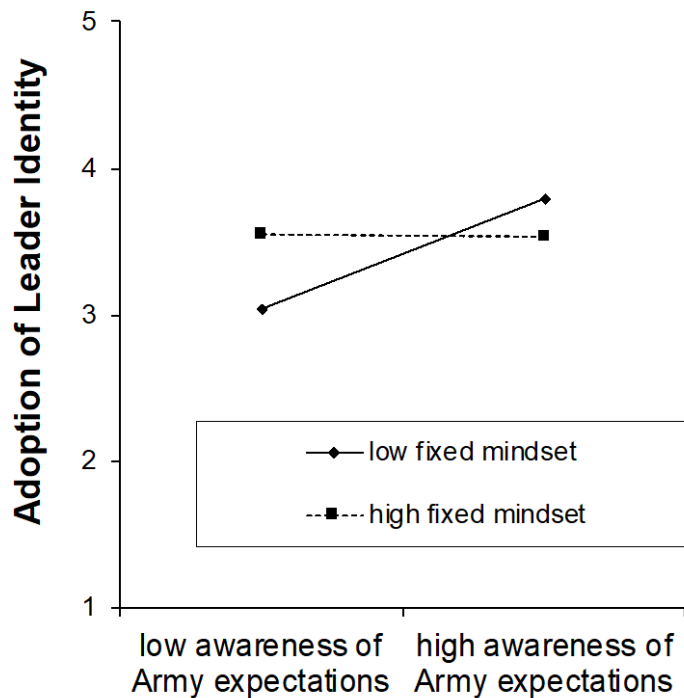
Note. Slopes are simple slopes from regression analysis. Controlling for age, group, and prior leadership experience.

The Value of Prior Leadership Experience

To what extent does prior leadership experience matter and does it matter whether that experience occurred inside or outside of the Army? First, these two kinds of experience were unrelated. For example, there was no significant relationship between having held a leadership position in the Army and having held a leadership position outside of the Army (r = -.11, p = .16). Interestingly, outside leadership experience was positively related to self-confidence in one's leadership; however, leadership experience within the Army was not. Across several different metrics of outside leadership—whether they had outside experience or not (Yes vs. No; r = .20, p = .012), the number of outside leadership positions (r = .19, p = .018), and the total duration of outside leadership experience (r = .23, p = .005)—outside leadership positively correlated with self-confidence. The same variables measuring Army leadership experience were unrelated to self-confidence. This divergence could be due to when that leadership experience occurred. Much of the Army leadership experience would have naturally followed promotion

and therefore would necessarily have occurred too late to influence self-confidence during the critical NCO promotion and training period. In contrast, much of the outside leadership experience may have come before the participant enlisted and therefore could have occurred early enough to bolster their self-confidence once they entered the Army and were promoted.

Discussion

By using a mixed-methods design, we were able to gather a data covering a broad range of factors that potentially affect role transition along with in-depth specifics about the impact of challenges experienced throughout the transition process. The analysis of the quantitative data indicated several issues which often affected these Soldiers as they transitioned into leadership roles. Likewise, a number of common challenges emerged through the analysis of the data obtained through focus groups and interviews. The results from both data sources converged to highlight the primary difficulties encountered by prospective and new enlisted leaders in the Army today. While the results covered many aspects of the transition, they generally distilled down to three factors that appeared to have the greatest impact on the transition: preparation time for promotion, availability of role models or mentors and motivation to lead. Several individual factors played some role as well in differentiating between the more successful and more difficult transition experienced reported in our sample.

Time appeared to be very salient overall and affected many of the other factors identified as important in the transition process. In particular, two facets of time seemed to be highly relevant for the shift into the duties and responsibilities of leading Soldiers. One time-related factor was the personal maturation and psychological development of the individual. This was most apparent when comparing Soldier who had entered the military in their late teens or early twenties to those who entered later. Many of those who entered later pointed to life experience and professional or managing experience as easing their transition into leadership roles in the Army. Participants who had a significant bank of life and work experiences to fall back told us it was useful because they were able to apply what they knew already to inform possible courses of action. Many NCOs, both those who came in later and those who did not, pointed to the importance of maturity in handling the responsibilities and role separation inherent in the transition into leadership. Given these results, life experience and maturity appear to be important for senior leaders to keep in mind while preparing prospective leaders, because while they cannot necessarily have a direct influence on either, knowing where a prospective NCO sits relative could be informative for leaders to identify which potential leaders may need additional support as they become leaders.

The second way in which time was relevant in role transition came through having adequate time for the potential or new leader to process and become familiar with the duties and responsibilities of leading. Because the transition involves such a complex array of competing demands, allowing individuals time to properly understand and process what is expected of them is very helpful to ensure the transition into leadership roles is successful. This shift in role required changes across many domains, most notably professional, social, and personal, of the new leader's life. Recognizing and making where changes are necessary can be challenging for many individuals. Failing to implement changes in any area can have significant consequences, even across domains. One of the most critical areas of the shift from follower to leader was the

separation from former role as team member and from peers who remain in that group. NCOs who reported feeling that there was not sufficient time during training to process information reported less success separating from their prior role as team member. The more they struggled separating from their prior role, the less confident they were in their ability to lead and effectively influence their Soldiers. Allowing adequate time for the new leader to process what is necessary to be successful in their new role and to separate from their old role, and peer group, should help to alleviate some of the difficulties many experience.

Time to make sense of and incorporate information is essential, however in order to ensure that the time is well spent, it is imperative that emerging leaders have quality information to process. One of the most direct routes to that knowledge acquisition is through role models or direct mentors. Army leader development materials often point to the importance of developing others, particularly the next generation of leaders. Academic literature also points to the potential positive impact of mentoring and developing potential leaders from within organizations. However, it appears that the realization of mentoring for junior NCOs in the Army today is inconsistent at best. Participants who identified having at least one significant mentor in the lead up to or during their role transition, generally reported much less difficulty and uncertainty in that process. The mentoring relationship paid noticeable dividends for the new leaders in their development and, potentially more importantly for the sustainment of the Army, gave them a model to work from to provide that support to the individuals they would be charged with developing in the future.

The presence of an effective mentor was reportedly a key developmental support for many NCOs; the value of mentors was particularly apparent in the first-hand accounts provided during the focus groups and interviews. This is not surprising, as it echoes the importance of mentorship as highlighted in both the empirical literature and Army doctrine. Where, when, and how the mentoring relationship was established varied considerably. The mentor could be one of the junior leader's direct leaders, other leaders in the unit or even leaders outside of their unit. However, the commonality of the importance did not seem to vary, mentors were seen as a strong guiding influence as well as a reliable source of knowledge and advice. Many of the NCOs who identified having mentors stated that the developmental relationship continued for years, even after one or both parties had a moved to other units or locations. The lasting bond created through the mentoring relationship was important to mentees as it helped to bolster their confidence and gave them a resource they could access in times of uncertainty.

Another major contributor to the development of junior NCOs is the availability of feedback, be it from their leaders or mentors, or probably most beneficially, from both. Giving junior NCOs clear and frequent feedback appears to help ease the transition into leadership roles, primarily through reinforcing their leader identity and clarification of expectations of them as leaders. The focus groups and individual interviews revealed that many junior NCOs desire more feedback on their leadership behavior, especially in the earliest stages of assuming a leadership role. By being intentional about observing and providing feedback on the behavior and decision making of new leaders, senior leaders can provide scaffolding for novices to reflect on and learn from their experiences to much larger degree than if they are left to do so on their own.

Our results regarding feedback indicated that a very important element of that feedback was communicating clear guidance about what the Army expects of its leaders to prospective leaders. Specific feedback about expectations, both unit-specific and for larger Army-wide expectations, can be particularly helpful for increasing a new NCO's motivation to lead. Specifically, an NCO who is uncertain about the Army's expectations may quickly lose their motivation to be a leader or they may become discouraged as they attempt to discern what is expected of them through a trial-and-error method. Thus, strengthening prospective and new leaders' understanding of what is expected of them should a primary focus of preparatory and developmental interactions and feedback. Of note, it is also important that the message about expectations of leaders is consistent in both content and behavior from all levels of leadership in the Army.

The survey results revealed the wide-ranging value and importance of providing quality feedback. NCOs who reported receiving more feedback from their leaders had a stronger current desire to be a leader. Feedback had this positive effect on motivation to lead because it helped to reinforce leader identify and understanding what the Army expects of its leaders. Importantly, the value of feedback was not limited to those NCOs who reported desiring feedback. Feedback from one's leaders had the strongest positive impact—in terms of increasing leadership motivation—on the NCOs who reported a lower desire for feedback. This pattern suggests that feedback could be particularly effective at reaching those who are at greatest risk of becoming disengaged during the NCO transition process.

The power of feedback and mentoring on the development of new leaders underscores the importance of time as a preparatory element. Simply by having more time and opportunity to receive feedback or other input, a new leader will likely be better prepared to transition quickly and successfully. Allowing time for transitioning leaders to make sense of the feedback they receive and incorporate what they are learning can also help to support the transition and foster their identity as a leader as well.

To be in a position to provide feedback, senior leaders and mentors will need to have observed instances of leadership behavior about which to provide feedback. This highlights another major difficulty for many junior leaders – relatively few opportunities to exercise leadership skills or decision-making. There was some discrepancy as to the cause of this paucity. Senior leaders tended to attribute it to lack of initiative or willingness of junior leaders to take opportunities, while the junior leaders reported a perceived lack of authority and micromanagement of tasks as inhibiting their ability to act as leaders. Regardless of the cause, which likely varied across contexts and individuals, enabling and encouraging more leading behavior by prospective and new leaders should help to advance their development.

In the focus groups and individual interviews, many NCOs reported a lack of autonomy. Although they were leaders and had Soldiers for whom they were responsible, they felt that they had little latitude to make key, and even routine, decisions. Instead, they reported feeling constrained by superiors who micromanaged. Similarly, the survey results pointed to the potential value of giving NCOs greater decision-making autonomy. Decision-making autonomy was positively related to wanting and receiving feedback and had similar effects on the desire to lead as did feedback. That is, decision-making autonomy increased the desire to lead by

increasing identity as a leader and knowledge of what the Army expects of its leaders. This effect of decision-making autonomy was stronger for NCOs who, prior to being promoted to NCO, had a low desire to lead or little leadership experience. Apparently, experiencing decision-making autonomy stimulated the desire to lead in NCOs who did not initially want to be leaders.

These results suggest that giving junior NCOs some autonomy and latitude in their leadership decision-making will help develop leadership capabilities and motivation to lead. Instead of treating junior NCOs as conduits, who are simply passing information from their leaders to their Soldiers and focusing on transactions, the focus should be on helping junior NCOs become more transformational leaders who communicate clearly and motivate their team. By giving prospective and new NCOs opportunities to actually perform as a leader, make decisions, and take responsibility for task completion, they will begin to feel more like leaders and more fully embrace that identity. The best way to accomplish this would likely be to start with smaller, low-risk tasks and then to iteratively increase responsibility and task difficulty. There should also be an understanding that the novice leader may not always be successful on a task and that mistakes will be made. These missteps are opportunities for learning and be great sources of experience and motivation if handled properly, reiterating the importance of quality feedback from superiors and mentors. Also, the results suggest that such autonomy may be critical for maintaining and bolstering their desire to lead and for facilitating their adoption of a leader identity.

An important element of successful transition into leading is actually wanting to lead. A number of prospective, and even new, leaders in our sample expressed a lack of desire to lead, either currently or in the past. The reasons they identified for not desiring leadership roles varied but ultimately there were a few main themes. The first was that some never wanted to be leaders. Interestingly, as noted previously, this can potentially be remedied by providing some autonomy and by giving feedback about performance. Another common refrain regarding lack of motivation to be a leader was that some Soldiers wanted to be leaders but were discouraged by lack of autonomy or lack of opportunity to lead. Again, established leaders can address this directly through extending authority to act as a leader and by encouraging their junior leaders to seek out opportunities to lead. Another common reason was the perception that junior NCOs were not valued in their units. This typically resulted from lack of authority, autonomy, or micromanagement. Some junior leaders also reported experiencing a lack of support from their superiors as a strong deterrent to leading. This was expressed primarily through a lack of support for their authority or decision-making. The lack of perceived value of junior NCOs within the unit could negatively impact Soldiers view of the value of becoming a leader. Relatedly, this also could be detrimental to retention as not want to be a leader potentially led some Soldiers to decide not to re-enlist to avoid the requirement to get promoted.

Interestingly, the survey results revealed the importance of two discriminant individual factors: growth mindset (believing that leadership is learnable) and prior leadership experience outside of the Army. Before assuming a leadership position, Soldiers have personal beliefs and experiences that may influence how they respond to the transition from follower to leader. An easily identifiable distinction was apparent when comparing NCOs who initially viewed leadership as fixed to NCOs who viewed leadership as learnable. NCOs with a growth mindset wanted more feedback and were more likely to see themselves as leaders as their understanding

of the Army's expectations for its leaders increased. As such, supervisors and other leaders can increase NCOs' responsiveness to feedback and adoption of identity as leaders by clarifying the Army's expectations for NCOs who have a growth mindset regarding leading. Another important and easily identifiable factor found in our results was the effect of prior leadership experience. NCOs who had held positions of leadership outside of the Army (e.g., captain of a sports team) reported having greater confidence in their leadership ability when promoted to NCO. This result suggests that it may be worthwhile to ask about prior leadership positions the Soldier has held. If a particular Soldier does not have prior leadership experience they may benefit from increased attention and mentorship in order to boost their self-confidence as a leader. Fortunately, these two factors are easily identifiable by asking simple questions of new and prospective NCOs (e.g., "Do you think leadership is learnable? or "Have you held a position of leadership outside of the Army?") in the course of counseling or mentoring. The answers to these simple questions can help mentors and other leaders to more efficiently allocate time and developmental experiences to their mentees and subordinates.

In the Army both formal training and less structured leader development activities are necessary to develop new leaders. While it is very important in the developmental process, formal leadership schooling is limited to some degree because it is very time-limited, encompassing a few key milestone instances along the path of an NCO's development. In light of that, developing leaders must be encouraged to seek occasions for leadership development during the comparatively abundant time outside of institutional leadership courses. In the survey results, being encouraged to seek such opportunities bolstered NCOs' desire to lead and did so because such encouragement helped communicate what the Army expects of its leader and helped NCOs see themselves as leaders. Thus, senior NCOs may be able to facilitate the leadership development process by providing such encouragement to junior NCOs and those Soldiers who may be promoted to NCO. Other methods, such as NCO Professional Development (NCOPD) programs at units, can also supplement learning of leadership approaches, principles, and techniques that can support leader growth outside of formal schooling. However, the quality and frequency NCOPD events varies widely across units and is highly dependent upon senior leaders' engagement and ability to construct and implement an effective program.

Limitations and Other Considerations

We would have preferred a more representative sample of Soldiers, but we were limited in the participants who were available, due to limited participant acquisition processes and COVID-19 related restrictions. The survey data were collected at two discrete points in time and as such may be subject to response biases, such as common method variance, consistency, and social desirability. Since all the variables were measured at one point in time, their relationships do not definitively establish causality. Additional research that is longitudinal with measures before, during, and after training, and with external indicators of training experience (e.g., ratings of feedback, autonomy, and performance), would be valuable.

Pre- vs. Post-COVID Samples

There were minor differences between pre- and post-COVID responses. The post-COVID participants reported a greater desire to lead, greater knowledge of the Army's

expectations, and receiving of more feedback. This was surprising, since they were younger and had fewer leadership experiences than the pre-COVID sample. The command climate and culture of the installations weigh heavily on an individual's response. Post-COVID data were collected from an installation that has received some negative press due to isolated Soldier issues. Also, the Post-COVID sampling was performed amongst units that were recognized by the U.S. Army as having a high retention rate and as being a favorite installation on which to work and live.

The differences between the pre- and post-COVID groups could be due to random sampling error. In particular, the pre-COVID surveys and interviews were from collected from smaller Army installations and a much smaller sample of personnel. We therefore caution against drawing strong conclusions from the minor differences between the two groups. Most importantly, despite these minor differences, the inclusion of the Post-COVID sample did not meaningfully alter any of the primary findings.

Recommendations and Implications

Our recommendations to support the growth of individuals into leadership roles fall in line with established leader preparation knowledge and best practices, specifically: (a) provide formative experiences, preferably phased to allow for interim growth and lessen the chances for the prospective leader to be overwhelmed, (b) ensure that the new leader receives feedback from multiple sources during preparation for role transition and as the new leader navigates the challenges of their new role, and (c) empower new leaders to make decisions and respect their authority and responsibility to do so. The good news is that these are not novel, they are largely practices that the Army traditionally has used to prepare its NCOs.

Our first recommendation is to provide prospective and new leaders formative experiences, preferably phased to allow for interim growth and lessen the chance that the individual will become overwhelmed as they grow accustomed to their new duties and responsibilities. Preparatory performance of leading behavior and meaningful decision-making are crucial to ensure Soldiers will be adequately prepared to transition in roles of higher responsibility. Ensuring that Soldiers begin having minor leading experiences as early when they are privates first class or new specialists is especially important when considering the current rapid pace of promotion to junior NCO ranks. By focusing on early and progressively more demanding experiences, senior leaders can facilitate Soldiers being, and feeling, ready to take on leadership roles by the time they are needed to fill those billet. It is also important to restate here that time to practice elements of leadership is beneficial not just because it helps the junior NCOs absorb and process that information but also because it provides the time needed to separate from their identity as a team member, something with which the junior NCOs in the current sample seemed to particularly struggle.

Second, ensuring that new leaders receives quality feedback, ideally from multiple sources, during preparation and training leading up to transition. Clarifying expectations of leaders was reported to be an important factor in many NCOs successful transition into leading. If Soldiers do not have a functional understanding of what it means to be a leader in the Army, they may be reluctant to take on such a role. In addition, as a new leader navigates the challenges

of their new role, feedback continues to be important to support their learning and growth from novel leading experiences and challenges. The results also highlight the value of senior leaders knowing what kinds of questions to ask, and indicators to look for, in order to identify Soldiers who may be at highest risk of becoming disengaged and demotivated or simply who may need additional attention when it comes to leadership development. Specifically, as shown in our results, simply asking about growth mindset in relation to leadership and prior leadership experiences can help mentors and senior leaders target feedback and experiences to address each individual's developmental needs more effectively.

Third, empower new leaders to make decisions and respect their authority and responsibility to do so. Our results indicate this can have a direct impact on an important component of leadership, the desire to lead. NCOs who did not think of themselves as leaders and had little prior leadership experience could become motivated to lead if they received consistent feedback and were able to exercise decision-making autonomy. Feedback, decision-making autonomy, and being encouraged to seek outside opportunities for leadership development all bolstered the desire to lead in part because they helped communicate or reinforce the Army's expectations of its leaders. The desire to lead, or more correctly the lack of desire to lead, was an issue that affected many Soldiers in our sample. This was often borne out of perceived lack of value of the role of junior NCO, lack of clarity about expectations or standards. Tying in with the previous points, lack of desire to lead appeared to be less prominent in situations in which the Soldiers had good developmental experiences and engaged leaders or mentors to provide feedback as well as communicate expectations and standards.

The challenge facing the Army is how to infuse these developmental processes into a system in which leaders at all levels have time constraints and demands on their and their Soldiers' time. In some ways, this approach to NCO transition requires a return to an older paradigm, in which direct developmental experiences and interactions were given more attention. The challenges of garrison life are much more diverse and often more subtle than those in combat. With the shift back to a more home station–centric approach, many Army leaders are having to learn and adapt to a different type of leadership. Technology, while ostensibly increasing connectivity, can also serve as an inhibitor as it changes what used to be face-to-face interactions into remote ones. However, innovative use of technology in leader development processes may provide an avenue to reach the digital native Soldiers of today where they are, while still allowing the Army to reinstitute the best parts of previous developmental processes for junior leaders. It will take active engagement from both sides, both developing and senior leaders, to bridge the needs of leader development in the digital Army.

Junior NCOs potentially face challenges across several domains as they transition to leadership roles. Fortunately, our results suggest that there are identifiable factors which predict better outcomes. Even more fortunately, these factors are all able to be influenced by the leaders and mentors who have primary responsibility for preparing Soldiers to make the role transition from follower into leading others. Another important factor is that the aspects we identified require little in the way of resources so they should be actionable at all echelons in all components, leading a broad impact across the entire Army.

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Appendix A

Project Summary

Role Transition from Team Member to Noncommissioned Officer

(1) **Purpose of the research:** The purpose of the research is to examine the transition process from junior enlisted Soldier to Noncommissioned Officer (NCO), identify challenges or barriers to a successful transition, and recommend solutions to address these challenges.

(2) **What you will be asked to do in this research:** You will be asked to answer a demographic and leadership questionnaire and participate in a focus group interview. The purpose of the focus group is to capture your lived transition experiences so the Army can work to improve this process in the future. Following the focus groups, individual interviews may be conducted with
1-2 participants who will be asked to share their individual stories. With your permission, sessions will be audio recorded to ensure accurate capture of the content. With appropriate review the information collected here may be used in future research projects.

(3) **Voluntary participation:** *We understand that you are mandated to be present at the research location, but from here on your participation is voluntary.* ***Refusal to participate or discontinuation of participation will result in no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.*** *If you choose not to participate please remain seated if you wish or return to you designated duty location. Agreeing to participate in the focus group does not mean that you must also agree to participate in a follow-up interview. If you are asked to stay for an individual interview, you may choose at that time whether to agree or decline. Similarly, agreeing to be audio recorded during the focus group does not mean you must agree to be audio recorded during an individual interview.*

(4) **Confidentiality:** We will not identify you, nor attribute specific responses to you or any other particular participant within this exercise. All responses will be kept confidential and your privacy protected. We will NOT include your name or the name of your unit, or other personally identifiable information in any report or documents provided outside of the context of this exercise. All data will be stored in an encrypted database, in a safe, locked location within one of the researcher's facilities. Only project personnel who have been officially documented and approved will have access to the data.

We cannot provide confidentiality or non-attribution to a participant regarding comments involving criminal activity/behavior, or statements that pose a threat to yourself or others.

(5) **Time required**. Focus group sessions will take approximately two hours (15 minutes for introductions and instructions, 15 minutes for questionnaires, and 90 minutes for the focus group discussion). Some participants may be asked to participate in an additional one-hour interview.

(6) **Risks**. Although we have approved safeguards to secure these data, there is always some risk that data will be disclosed. We encourage participants to respect the privacy of fellow

participants by not repeating comments of individuals heard in the focus group.

(7) **Benefits**. There are no direct benefits to you as a result of participation in this project. However, information collected as part of this project will benefit the Army's awareness and understanding of the process for Soldiers as they transition into NCOs.

(8) **Compensation**. There will be no compensation for your participation.

(9) **Whom to contact if you have questions about the research project**.____@____ *with the "Role Transition from Team Member to NCO" in Subject line.*

(10) **Whom to contact about your rights in the research or if you incur a research related injury**. _____@_____ *with the "Role Transition from Team Member to NCO" in Subject line.*

(11) If responding to any of the questions becomes unpleasant for you, you can withdraw from the conversation at any time. Please note the numbers on the card we handed out. If you feel you'd like to confer with someone confidentially after this discussion, please go to the Military OneSource web site (https://www.militaryonesource.mil) or call the 1-800-342-9647 number.

Please leave this cover page attached to the following packet.

Do not write your name or any other identifying information on this packet.

Role Transition from Team Member to NCO

Once your questions about the research have been answered, please indicate below whether or not you are willing to participate in the research session and whether or not you are willing to be audio recorded.

Agreement: I have read the procedures described above and (check one)

_____I voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

_____ I DO NOT agree to participate in the study.

Audio recording:

_____I voluntarily consent to audio recording this session.

_____ I DO NOT agree to audio recording this session.

RETURN THIS PAGE TO RESEARCHER

Appendix B

Introduction Script

Role Transition from Team Member to Noncommissioned Officer

Thank you for taking the time out of your schedules to share your experiences. This survey is being sponsored by the Army Research Institute. We are conducting this research to better understand the transition from junior enlisted to Noncommissioned Officer (NCO). Specifically, we are interested in the challenges involved in this transition broadly from both personal and professional perspectives.

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. You are the experts, and we are here to learn from you. We appreciate your candid feedback of issues you have experienced or anticipate experiencing as you become a leader. 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.

No one participating will be identifiable in any products emerging from this research. All responses will be collected anonymously and kept entirely confidential.

For more information about this process, please take a few minutes to read the Project Summary and Privacy Act Statement that are part of the informed consent process. You are welcome to retain this page for your records, as well as the Project Summary and Privacy Act Statement. If you have questions about the research, please see the contact information provided at the end of the Project Summary.

Please remember, you are free to stop participating at any time, if you so choose. If you choose to participate, please return this packet to the designated location upon completion. You will not be asked to write your name or any other identifying information on the survey, so nobody will know whether or not you decided to participate or how you responded.

Appendix C

Leadership Transition Questionnaire

Instructions: To what extent do the following statements accurately describe your experience? In answering these questions, it is important to pay close attention to the time frame each question header is inquiring (for example: before, during, currently). When applicable, think about a time when you were in a leadership position. Please rate each item using the 5-point scale (1 = not at all, 5 = very much). If a question does not apply to you (e.g., you have not been in a leadership position) please mark the question with N/A (not applicable).

<u>Before</u> I was promoted to a leadership rank . . .

	Not at all 1	2	Somewhat 3	4	Very Much 5
1. I had a strong desire to be a leader	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. I believed that leadership was something that could be learned	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. I believed that a person's leadership ability is something that can't be changed much	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

When I was <u>first promoted</u> to a leadership rank . . .

	Not at all 1	2	Somewhat 3	4	Very Much 5
4. I wasn't sure that I knew how to be a leader	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. I worried that I would miss being one of the troops	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. My leaders were excellent role models	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

During my leadership training . . .

	Not at all 1	2	Somewhat 3	4	Very Much 5
7. I had a mentor who guided me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. I changed the way I view myself, from a Soldier to a leader	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. I became more confident in my ability to lead	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. I had opportunities to practice being a leader	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. There wasn't enough time to process all the new information I was being taught	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

During my first leadership assignment . . .

	Not at all 1	2	Somewhat 3	4	Very Much 5
12. I felt confident that I could handle the responsibilities of a leader	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13. My Soldiers seemed to be testing my leadership	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

During my experiences as a leader . . .

	Not at all 1	2	Somewhat 3	4	Very Much 5
14. My leaders provided me with feedback that helped me develop as a leader	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
15. I was allowed to use my personal initiative or judgment in carrying out the work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
16. I saw myself as a leader	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
17. I asked my leaders for feedback and advice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
18. I was encouraged to pursue opportunities to develop as a leader outside of required training	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

19. I was eager for my leaders to tell me how I was doing as a leader	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
20. I was allowed to make a lot of decisions on my own	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
21. I worried that my team wouldn't respect my decisions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
22. My position provided me with significant autonomy in making decisions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
23. I wanted my leaders to tell me how I could improve as a leader	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
24. I received frequent feedback from my leaders	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

During my experiences as a first-time leader, the biggest sources of stress were . . .

	Not at all 1	2	Somewhat 3	4	Very Much 5
25. Gaining the trust of my Soldiers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
26. Separating my role as a leader from my role as a Soldier	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
27. Feeling that I was not ready to be a leader	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

At this point in time . . .

	Not at all 1	2	Somewhat 3	4	Very Much 5
28. I have a strong desire to be a leader	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
29. I know what the Army expects from its leaders	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

Instructions: Please answer the following questions as honestly and as accurately as possible.

1. What is your age?

    _____ years old

2. What is your current rank?
    a. SPC
    b. CPL
    c. SGT
    d. SSG
    e. SFC
    f. MSG/1SG
    g. SGM/CSM

3. What is your MOS?

    _____

4. Time in service in years?
    a. less than 2 years
    b. 2-4 years
    c. 5-6 years
    d. 7-8 years
    e. greater than 8 years

5. How long ago were you promoted to your current rank?
    a. 1 month ago or less
    b. 2-3 months ago
    c. 4-6 months ago
    d. 7 months – 1 year ago
    e. more than 1 year ago

6. When you were first promoted to SGT, were you moved to a new unit?
    a. No
    b. Yes
    c. N/A

7. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- a. High school graduate/GED
- b. Associate Degree
- c. Bachelor's Degree
- d. Master's Degree
- e. Professional Degree or Ph.D.

8. Which of the following staff positions have you held?

Position	Circle YES or NO		Duration in years and months (for example, 3 years, 2 months)	# of individuals under your leadership
Squad Leader	YES	NO		
Team Leader	YES	NO		
Section Leader	YES	NO		
Staff NCOIC	YES	NO		

9. List any leadership positions you held <u>outside</u> of the Army (for example, a leadership position in high school JROTC, College ROTC, school sports (e.g., captain), school clubs, school government, volunteer groups, or civilian workplace).

Position	Duration in years and months (for example, 3 years, 2 months)	# of individuals under your leadership

10. Have you deployed to a combat theater of operations, non-combat, or rotational

Where Deployed/Type of Deployment	Duration in Months	Leadership role during deployment	# of individuals under your leadership

Appendix D

Leadership Transition Questionnaire (Key)

Instructions: To what extent do the following statements accurately describe your experience? In answering these questions, it is important to pay close attention to the time frame each question header is inquiring (e.g., before, during, currently). When applicable, think about a time when you were in a leadership position. Please rate each item using the 5-point scale (1 = not at all, 5 = very much). If a question does not apply to you (e.g., you have not been in a leadership position) please mark the question with N/A (not applicable).

Before I was promoted to a leadership rank . . .					
	Not at all (1)	2	3	4	Very much (5)
1. I had a strong desire to be a leader (I)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. I believed that leadership was something that could be learned (H)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. I believed that a person's leadership ability is something that can't be changed much (H)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When I was first promoted to a leadership rank . . .					
	Not at all (1)	2	3	4	Very much (5)
4. I wasn't sure that I knew how to be a leader (A)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. I worried that I would miss being one of the troops (C)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. My leaders were excellent role models (F)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

During my leadership training . . .					
	Not at all (1)	2	3	4	Very much (5)
7. I had a mentor that guided me (F)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. I changed the way I view myself, from a Soldier to a leader (D)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. I became more confident in my ability to lead (A)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. I had opportunities to practice being a leader (E)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. There wasn't enough time to process all the new information I was being taught (E)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

During my first leadership assignment . . .					
	Not at all (1)	2	3	4	Very much (5)
12. I felt confident that I could handle the responsibilities of a leader (A)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13. My Soldiers seemed to be testing my leadership (B)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

During my experiences as a leader . . .

	Not at all (1)	2	3	4	Very much (5)
14. My leaders provided me with feedback that helped me develop as a leader (F)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
15. I was allowed to use my personal initiative or judgment in carrying out the work (C)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
16. I did not see myself as a leader (D)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
17. I asked my leaders for feedback and advice (G)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
18. I was encouraged to pursue opportunities to develop as a leader outside of required training (D)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
19. I was eager for my leaders to tell me how I was doing as a leader (E)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
20. I was allowed to make a lot of decisions on my own (C)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
21. I worried that my team wouldn't respect my decisions (B)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
22. My position provided me with significant autonomy in making decisions (C)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

23. I wanted my leaders to tell me how I could improve as a leader (G)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
24. I received frequent feedback from my leaders (F)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

During my experiences as a first-time leader, the biggest sources of stress were . . .

	Not at all (1)	2	3	4	Very much (5)
25. Gaining the trust of my Soldiers (B)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
26. Separating my role as a leader from my role as a Soldier (D)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
27. Feeling that I was not ready to be a leader (A)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

At this point in time . . .

	Not at all (1)	2	3	4	Very much (5)
28. I have a strong desire to be a leader (I)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
29. I know what the Army expects from its leaders (F)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Key

A = Self-Confidence
B = Social Influence

C = Decision-Making Autonomy
D = Identity
E = Opportunities for Learning
F = Received Feedback
G = Desired Feedback
H = Fixed vs. Growth Mindset
I = Desire to Lead

A = Self-Confidence

4. I wasn't sure that I knew how to be a leader (A) (reverse-score)

12. I felt confident that I could handle the responsibilities of a leader (A)

9. I became more confident in my ability to lead (A)

27. Feeling that I was not ready to be a leader (A) (reverse-score)

B = Social Influence

13. My Soldiers seemed to be testing my leadership (B) (reverse-score)

21. I worried that my team wouldn't respect my decisions (B) (reverse-score)

25. Gaining the trust of my soldiers (B) (reverse-score)

C = Decision-Making Autonomy

15. I was allowed to use my personal initiative or judgment in carrying out the work (C)

20. I was allowed to make a lot of decisions on my own (C)

22. My position provided me with significant autonomy in making decisions (C)

D = Identity

5. I worried that I would miss being one of the troops (D) (reverse-score)

8. I changed the way I view myself, from a Soldier to a leader (D)

16. I did not see myself as a leader (D) (reverse-score)

26. Separating my role as a leader from my role as a team member (D) (reverse-score)

E = Opportunities for Learning

10. I had opportunities to practice being a leader (E)

11. There wasn't enough time to process all the new information I was being taught (E) (reverse-score)

18. I was encouraged to pursue opportunities to develop as a leader outside of required training (E)

F = Received Feedback

6. My leaders were excellent role models (F)

7. I had a mentor that guided me (F)

14. My leaders provided me with feedback that helped me develop as a leader (F)

24. I received frequent feedback from my leaders (F)

29. I know what the Army expects from its leaders (F)

G = Desired Feedback

17. I asked my leaders for feedback and advice (G)

18. I was eager for my leaders to tell me how I was doing as a leader (G)

23. I wanted my leaders to tell me how I could improve as a leader (G)

H = Growth vs. Fixed Mindset

1. I believed that leadership was something that can be learned (H)

3. I believed that a person's leadership ability is something that can't be changed much (H) (reverse-score)

I = Desire to Lead

1. I had a strong desire to be a leader (I)

29. I have a strong desire to be a leader (I)

Appendix E

Junior NCO Focus Group and Individual Interview Protocols

NCO Transition Focus Group and Individual Interviews

Goal of the Interview:
To elicit the following information about NCOs to better understand their perspectives and challenges of transitioning from a team member to a leadership role:
- The participant's background;
- Key challenges in NCO transitions;
- Perceptions of preparedness and gaps in preparedness for those challenges;
- What has worked during transitions?
- Experiences about the transition process

I. Project Overview (5 min)

<u>DO</u>: *After a brief overview of why we're here, hand out copies of the project summary and review. Ask them to indicate at the end of the project summary (a) whether they are willing to participate, and (b) whether they agree to be audio-recorded. If participants do not wish to participate remind them there are no consequences for not participating and instruct the participants to sit quietly or return to their units.*

II. Demographic Form and Leadership Transition Questionnaire (15 min)
<u>DO</u>: *After a brief overview of the demographic form and leadership questionnaire, hand out copies of the demographic form and leadership transition questionnaire, and have them complete.*

III. Focus Group (90 min)

A. Overview:

Participants will be requested in advance for one of the following groups:
- *Group 1 (Jr.): SPC, CPL (focus group of ~7 people followed by interviews)*
- *Group 2 (Jr.): SGT, SSG (focus group of ~7 people followed by interviews)*

SAY: We'd like to understand the transition process from team member to Noncommissioned Officer that you have experienced or anticipate experiencing. We have a few ground rules**:**

1. Give others a chance to contribute
2. Be thoughtful
3. Be respectful towards others
4. Be open and clear
5. Do not use people's names or unit designations
6. Do not mention classified or operationally sensitive information

7. Do not repeat outside of this group anything discussed during the session

B. Identification of Challenges in the NCO Transition Process:

_DO_: *Have large butcher chart paper or white board to record responses. Three columns: Challenge, Impacts, Advice.*

SAY: If you had to choose the biggest challenge for you personally in transitioning from a team member to NCO/leader, what was that challenge?
- What was the impact of the challenges on **your** transition process?
- What advice would you give to a new NCOs facing this challenge?

After the first response, ask:
What about someone else? What was your biggest challenge for you personally that we haven't discussed?

(I would ask whether others had experienced something similar, if so, please share it with the group.)

_DO_: *Repeat until everyone who wants to participate has had an opportunity to.*

C. Identification of effective transition practices in the NCO Transition Process:

_DO_: *Have large butcher chart paper or white board to record responses.*

SAY: If you had to choose what helped you the most during the transition from team member to NCO/leader, what would that be (schools, training, mentorship, on the job training)?
- How did this help you transition more successfully?
- What aspect of your transition did you feel most prepared for?

After the first response, ask:
What about someone else? If you had to choose what helped you the most during the transition process that we haven't already discussed, what would that be (schools, training, mentorship, on the job training, etc.)?
- How did this help you transition more successfully?
- What aspect of your transition did you feel most prepared for?

_DO_: *Repeat until everyone who wants to participate has had an opportunity to.*

SAY: Is there anything we haven't discussed about the transitioning from team member to NCO/leader that we should know?

DO: *Thank the participants for their time. If you have identified a specific salient example or experience during the focus group, ask that individual whether he/she would be willing to stay and provide additional information.*

III. Time Constrained Individual Critical Decision Method Interview (60 min)

Goal: Identify a challenging incident the participant faced transitioning from team member to NCO process. The goal is to capture these experiences to support our findings from this phase of the project.

A. Incident identification (5 min)

SAY: We're interested in your experience transitioning from a team member to NCO. Can you think of a time during your transitioning process that was particularly challenging where you may have felt less prepared than you would have liked in making decisions or assessments? The kind of event we're looking for could have happened over a few hours, a few days, weeks or months.

Note: Give the participant time to think. They often have something they want to tell you and it may be difficult to move them away from that event even if it isn't exactly what you want. Recommendation is that if it was a new type of job/task for them and they had not really had a way to prepare for it, use it.

B. Brief overview of incident and start timeline (15 min)
DO: *Start timeline now. Tell participant you are starting a timeline to record major events and relative time between them.*

SAY: Can you give us a synopsis of the event from beginning to end?

DO: *Let them get through it once, but a quick overview only.*

SAY:
- When did you experience the situation?
- How did you define the problem? (Alternative: What was the main problem you needed to address in one or two sentences?)
- What were your expectations in this situation?
- Had you ever seen or heard of this situation or a similar one before? What prepared you for this situation?
- Who or what helped you resolve the problem?
- What did you take away or learn from this experience?

C. Identify assessments and decisions (10 min)

DO: *Go to each major event identified starting with first notification of the problem.*

SAY: At this point, what assessment or decision did you have to make?

D. Deepening (20 min)

_DO_: _Go to a specific assessment/decision point you have identified._

SAY: At this point

- What were your overriding concerns as a junior NCO? What were the concerns of others?
- Is there anything that stands out from the situation that made you more aware of your new role?
- Did you know what to expect or what was going to happen in this situation?
- What strategies/ techniques did you employ?

E. Hypotheticals (10 min)

- If you could do this transition over, what would you do differently?
- How would you advise someone to prepare for transition?
- Is there anything I haven't asked you about this incident that I should have?

Thank you for your participation.

Senior NCO (SFC) Focus Group and Individual Interviews

NCO Focus Groups and Individual Interviews

Goal of the Interview:
To elicit the following information about NCOs to better understand their perspectives and challenges of transitioning from a team member to a leadership role:
- The participant's background;
- Key challenges in NCO transitions;
- Perceptions of preparedness and gaps in preparedness for those challenges;
- What has worked during transitions?
- Experiences about the transition process

I. Project Overview (5 min)

_DO__: After a brief overview of why we're here, hand out copies of the project summary and review. Ask them to indicate at the end of the project summary (a) whether they are willing to participate, and (b) whether they agree to be audio-recorded. If participants do not wish to participate remind them there are no consequences for not participating and instruct the participants to sit quietly or return to their units._

II. Demographic Form and Leadership Transition Questionnaire (15 min)
_DO__: After a brief overview of the demographic form and leadership questionnaire, hand out copies of the demographic form and leadership transition questionnaire, and have them complete._

III. Focus Group (90 min)

A. Overview:

Participants will be requested in advance for the following group:
- _Group 3: (SR NCO) SFC (focus group of ~4 people; 1 -2 individual interviews)_

SAY: We'd like to understand the transition process from team member to Noncommissioned Officer that you experienced or have seen JR NCOs experiencing. We have a few ground rules**:**

1. Give others a chance to contribute
2. Be thoughtful
3. Be respectful towards others
4. Be open and clear
5. Do not use people's names or unit designations
6. Do not mention classified or operationally sensitive information
7. Do not repeat outside of this group anything discussed during the session

B. Identification of Challenges in the NCO Transition Process:

__DO__: Have large butcher chart paper or white board to record responses. Three columns: Challenge, Impacts, Advice.

__SAY__: If you had to choose the biggest challenge for you personally in transitioning from a team member to NCO/leader, what was that challenge?
- What was the impact of the challenges on __your__ transition process?
- What advice would you give to a new NCOs facing this challenge?
- What is one thing you are doing to support the transition process currently?

After the first response, ask:
What about someone else? What was your biggest challenge for you personally that we haven't discussed?

- What is one thing you are doing to support the transition process currently that we haven't discussed?
- What made transition challenging?
- What advice would you give to new NCOs/leaders facing this challenge?
- What aspect of your new role as an NCO did you feel least prepared for?

(I would ask whether others had experienced something similar, if so, please share it with the group.)

__DO__: Repeat until everyone who wants to participate has had an opportunity to.

C. Identification of effective transition practices in the NCO Transition Process:

__DO__: Have large butcher chart paper or white board to record responses.

__SAY__: If you had to choose what helped you the most during the transition from team member to NCO/leader, what would that be (schools, training, mentorship, on the job training)?
- How did this help you transition more successfully?
- What aspect of your transition did you feel most prepared for?

After the first response, ask:
What about someone else? If you had to choose what helped you the most during the transition process that we haven't already discussed, what would that be (schools, training, mentorship, on the job training, etc.)?
- How did this help you transition more successfully?
- What aspect of your transition did you feel most prepared for?

__DO__: Repeat until everyone who wants to participate has had an opportunity to.

SAY: Is there anything we haven't discussed about the transitioning from team member to NCO/leader that we should know?

DO: *Thank the participants for their time. If you have identified a specific salient example or experience during the focus group, ask that individual whether he/she would be willing to stay and provide additional information.*

IV. Time Constrained Individual Critical Decision Method Interview (60 min)

Goal: Identify a challenging incident the participant faced transitioning from team member to NCO process. The goal is to capture these experiences to support our findings from this phase of the project.

A. Incident identification (5 min)

SAY: We're interested in your experience transitioning from a team member to NCO. Can you think of a time during your transitioning process that was particularly challenging where you may have felt less prepared than you would have liked in making decisions or assessments? The kind of event we're looking for could have happened over a few hours, a few days, weeks or months.

Note: Give the participant time to think. They often have something they want to tell you and it may be difficult to move them away from that event even if it isn't exactly what you want. Recommendation is that if it was a new type of job/task for them and they had not really had a way to prepare for it, use it.

B. Brief overview of incident and start timeline (15 min)
DO: *Start timeline now. Tell participant you are starting a timeline to record major events and relative time between them.*

SAY: Can you give us a synopsis of the event from beginning to end?

DO: *Let them get through it once, but a quick overview only.*

SAY:
- When did you experience the situation?
- How did you define the problem? (Alternative: What was the main problem you needed to address in one or two sentences?)
- What were your expectations in this situation?
- Had you ever seen or heard of this situation or a similar one before? What prepared you for this situation?
- Who or what helped you resolve the problem?
- What did you take away or learn from this experience?

C. Identify assessments and decisions (10 min)

DO: *Go to each major event identified starting with first notification of the problem.*

SAY: At this point, what assessment or decision did you have to make?

D. Deepening (20 min)

_DO_: _Go to a specific assessment/decision point you have identified._

SAY: At this point

- What were your overriding concerns as a junior NCO? What were the concerns of others?
- Is there anything that stands out from the situation that made you more aware of your new role?
- Did you know what to expect or what was going to happen in this situation?
- What strategies/ techniques did you employ?

E. Hypotheticals (10 min)

- If you could do this transition over, what would you do differently?
- How would you advise someone to prepare for transition?
- Is there anything I haven't asked you about this incident that I should have?

Thank you for your participation.

Senior NCO (CSM/SGM/1SG/MSG) Individual Interview Protocol

NCO Transition Individual Interviews

Goal of the Interview:
To elicit the following information about NCOs to better understand their perspectives and challenges of transitioning
from a team member to a leadership role:
- The participant's background;
- Key challenges in NCO transitions;
- Perceptions of preparedness and gaps in preparedness for those challenges;
- What has worked during transitions?
- Experiences about the transition process

Project Overview (5 min)

***DO**: After a brief overview of why we're here, hand out copies of the project summary and review. Ask them to indicate at the end of the project summary (a) whether they are willing to participate, and (b) whether they agree to be audio-recorded. If participants do not wish to participate remind them there are no consequences for not participating and instruct the participants return to their unit.*

II. Demographic Form and Leadership Transition Questionnaire (5 min)
***DO**: After a brief overview of the demographic form and leadership questionnaire, hand out copies of the demographic form and leadership transition questionnaire, and have them complete.*

III. Individual Interview (30 min)

A. Overview:

Participants will be requested in advance for the following personnel:

- *Group 4: (SR NCO) CSM/SGM/1SG/MSG (individual interviews only)*

SAY: We'd like to understand the transition process from team member to Noncommissioned Officer that you experienced or have seen JR NCOs experiencing. We have a few ground rules**:**

1. Be open and clear
2. Do not use people's names or unit designations
3. Do not mention classified or operationally sensitive information
4. Do not repeat outside of this group anything discussed during the session

B. Identification of Challenges in the NCO Transition Process:

SAY: Think back about transition challenges from a team member to NCO/leader you have seen or experienced**.** What are those challenges? Which of these is the most important for ensuring a successful transition?

The participant lists the challenges.   One challenge is identified as most difficult.

Learn more about the challenge and effective strategies.

Time Constrained Individual Critical Decision Method Interview (30 - 60 min)

Goal: Identify a challenging incident the participant faced transitioning from team member to NCO process. The goal is to capture these experiences to support our findings from this phase of the project.

A. Incident identification (5 min)

SAY: We're interested in your experience dealing with the challenge of transitioning of a team member to NCO. Can you think of a strategy or approach that was used to facilitate the transition?   The kind of event we're looking for could have happened over a few hours, a few days, weeks or months.

Note: Give the participant time to think. They often have something they want to tell you and it may be difficult to move them away from that event even if it isn't exactly what you want. Recommendation is that if it was a new type of job/task for them and they had not really had a way to prepare for it, use it.

B. Brief overview of incident and start timeline (10 - 15 min)
DO: *Start timeline now. Tell participant you are starting a timeline to record major events and relative time between them.*

SAY: Can you give us a synopsis of the event from beginning to end?

DO: *Let them get through it once, but a quick overview only. Make a timeline or story arc that describes the sequence of events and key actions or decision points that were described.*
SAY:

- When did you experience the situation?

- How did you define the problem? (Alternative: What was the main problem you needed to address in one or two sentences?)

- What were your expectations in this situation?

- Had you ever seen or heard of this situation or a similar one before? What prepared you for this situation?

- Who or what helped you resolve the problem?

- What did you take away or learn from this experience?

C. Identify assessments and decisions (5 - 10 min)

DO: *Go to each major event identified starting with first indication of the problem.*

SAY: At this point, what assessment or decision did you have to make?

D. Deepening (15 - 20 min)

DO: *Go to a specific assessment/decision point you have identified.*

SAY: At this point

- What were your overriding concerns for the junior NCO? What were the concerns of others?

- Is there anything that stands out from the situation that made you more aware of your role as a coach or mentor?

- Did you know what to expect or what was going to happen in this situation?

- What strategies/ techniques did you employ?

E. Hypotheticals (10 min)

- If you could do this transition over, what would you do differently?

- How would you advise someone to prepare for transition?

- Is there anything I haven't asked you about this incident that I should have?

SAY: Is there anything we haven't discussed about the transitioning from team member to NCO/leader that we should know?

DO: *Thank the participants for their time. If you have identified a specific salient example or experience during the focus, ask that individual whether he/she would be willing to stay and provide additional information.*

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix H

Summarized Role Transition Recommendations by Rank

The following are summaries of the aggregated consensus actions that participants reported would be most helpful to the transition process according to each rank band in our sample. The lists are not exhaustive, but they include the substantive points of consensus regarding supporting and accelerating the transition process.

Table H1

Recommendations for Improving the Transition Process from the Perspective of SPCs and CPLs

SPC and CPL Recommendations by Topic

Team Environment
- Knowing you are in a structured team environment.
- Taking the time to build team cohesion.

Modernizing the Army to fit the current Soldiers
- No more smoke sessions or physical punishments for infractions.
- Enforce corrective training to be a relevant task.

Senior Leaders as Role Models and Mentors
- Ability to learn by example of what to do or what not to do.
- Expose yourself to a variety of leaders.
- Select role models who assist you in setting professional development goals.

Communication
- Share lessons learned and best practices.
- It is important to learn the Army writing style to prepare counseling statements, award recommendations, and evaluations. Well-written documents can benefit the Soldier, while poorly written ones can negatively impact them and may cost them an award or promotion.

Developing Self and Others
- Know your strengths and weaknesses and what type of leader you want to be.
- Have the mentality to train Soldiers to become better than you. Put Soldiers before self.
- Seek out a variety of positions to help you become a well-rounded leader. Be willing to go outside your comfort zone.
- Focus on critical and independent thinking. Move away from the checklists.
- Take the time to seek out training and develop your Soldiers.

Table H2

Recommendations for Improving the Transition Process from the Perspective of SGTs and SSGs

SGT and SSG Recommendations by Topic

Team Environment
- Take the time to build team cohesion.
- Learn from peers and maintain strong peer relationships.

Senior Leaders as Role Models and Mentors
- Able to learn by example of what to do or what not to do. Model good leadership behaviors.
- Expose yourself to all different types of leaders.
- Shadow a senior NCO to have time to integrate and learn how things are done.
- Good mentors are those who listen, are approachable, has had similar experiences, and points you in the right direction.
- Good mentors are humble and are true to themselves.

Communication
- Share lessons learned and best practices.
- It is important to learn the Army writing style to prepare counseling statements, award recommendations, and evaluations. Well written documents can benefit the Soldier, while poorly written ones can negatively impact them and may cost them an award or promotion.

Developing Self and Others
- Enforce Sergeants Time Training/Leaders Time Training as an Army standard.
- Develop calendar space to enable NCOs to have time to work with team members.
- Understanding what a leader needs to be based on doctrine and in practice.
- Army has digital copies of all training and doctrine. You need to know how to learn online.
- Being allowed to fail is a critical part of development. You learn more from your failures than successes.
- Accept feedback and criticism and view it as an opportunity for growth.
- Work on gaining an ability to adapt and improvise. This is a key skill for success.
- Ask questions; it is the best way to learn.
- Set realistic goals for yourself and work to achieve them.

Time Management Freedom
- Learn and employ techniques to manage your time for planning, tasking, and layouts.
- Have more time with your team for training, PT, weapon's range, etc.

Table H3

Recommendations for Improving the Transition Process from the Perspective of Senior NCOs

Senior NCO Recommendations by Topic

Team Environment
- Learn from senior NCOs how to effectively develop a team.
- Team sports or activities help build cohesiveness.

Senior Leaders as Role Models and Mentors
- Learn by example of what to do and/or what not to do. Model good leadership behaviors.
- Expose yourself to all different types of leaders.
- Shadow a senior NCO to have time to integrate and learn how things are done.
- Good mentors are humble and are true to themselves.
- Do counseling with new NCOs to help train them.
- Having someone who is tough and pushes Soldiers to be better makes a good NCO.
- Mentors can also be more senior peers.

Communication
- Share lessons learned and best practices.
- It is important to learn the Army writing style to prepare counseling statements, award recommendations, and evaluations. Well written documents can benefit the Soldier, while poorly written ones can negatively impact them and may cost them an award or promotion.

Developing Self and Others
- Be open to receiving 360 feedback to aid in self-development.
- Focus on learning/teaching effective writing.

Note. Senior NCO in this table refers to ranks from SFC to CSM.