



Research Product 2024-03

**A Guide for Enhancing Squad Shared
Understanding: Squad Leader Tips**

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

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A GUIDE FOR ENHANCING SQUAD SHARED UNDERSTANDING: SQUAD LEADER TIPS

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A GUIDE FOR ENHANCING SQUAD SHARED UNDERSTANDING: SQUAD LEADER TIPS

Creating a shared understanding is a principle used to build cohesive teams and to ensure successful operations (Army Techniques Publication [ATP] 6-22.6; U.S. Department of the Army, 2015). Shared understanding is a foundation of knowledge that is common across a group of people. This knowledge can be about a variety of things like the problem to be solved; Commander's intent; the operational environment; and Army doctrine and tactics, techniques, and procedures. Commanders can feel more confident in exercising mission command if their teams have a shared understanding (ATP 6-22.6 1-2; U.S. Department of the Army, 2015). Moreover, development of a shared understanding has many benefits such as increased performance (Cooke et al., 2003), including in situations where stress is a factor (Espevik et al., 2011). A shared understanding of a team's vision can also help that team improve coordination and reduce conflict (ATP 6-22.6 1-42; U.S. Department of the Army, 2015). In addition, the bonding time that is often a component of building and maintaining shared understanding can increase cohesion and trust within a team.

Shared understanding is important for both large and small teams. For example, small teams, such as units training at combat training centers, require shared understanding to effectively execute coordinated activity. However, they often fail to create a shared understanding, partly because they fail to formally capture notes that would allow information to be shared with other parts of the unit (Spangenberg, 2022). Similarly, large teams, such as U.S.-led multinational forces, require shared understanding to maintain readiness for interoperability in joint capacities. In these cases, all elements of a large, diverse team must maintain a shared awareness and knowledge of shared capabilities and their tactical employment (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2021). To do so can facilitate establishment of a shared procedural set, enable efficient information exchange, and reduce error.

One of the challenges with maintaining a shared understanding at lower echelons is the continuous member turnover that Squads experience. Until a new Soldier is able to learn the team's tasks and how to work with their new teammates, Squad readiness is degraded. Developing and maintaining shared knowledge could allow minimum Squad performance standards to be attained quickly after membership change, providing sustained training proficiency.

To assist with development of shared understanding at the Squad level, the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences has developed a handout for Squad Leaders. The intent is to give Squad Leaders suggestions for how they can leverage regularly occurring activities, such as Sergeant's Time Training, to build shared understanding with newly formed Squads as well as maintain shared understanding in existing Squads. This document includes a summary of the trifold handout. The Appendix includes the final version of the trifold handout. For more information about the scientific development process see Fleming et al. (2024).

Trifold Handout

Handout Purpose

The handout was developed based on best practices and tips from experienced Squad Leaders. Researchers conducted focus groups with seasoned Squad Leaders about how to leverage everyday activities to share knowledge and to quickly integrate new members into one's Squad. A part of this integration process is ensuring that all members of a Squad have a shared understanding of the mission, tasks, and procedures. Researchers synthesized and summarized best practices from experienced Squad Leaders to provide information in a concise, easily consumable format. In addition, many tips are linked to a specific section of Army doctrine so Squad Leaders can reference it for more context about what the activity should accomplish and how it can help the Squad be more effective.

Handout Audience

The handout could be used at any echelon level. However, it is most relevant to small teams, like Squads, that spend a lot of time together and have regular interactions with their immediate leader. According to ATP 6-22.6 (U.S. Department of the Army, 2015), building a shared understanding is an important component of building cohesive teams.

Handout Instructions

This handout focuses on how Squad Leaders can use everyday situations to encourage their Squad to create and maintain a shared understanding. These situations may be particularly important when a new junior enlisted Soldier is assigned to a Squad and the Squad Leader must ensure that they are quickly brought up to speed on team tasks while still ensuring that the Squad has adequate time to get to know one another on a more personal level. The handout provides suggestions for important components about which to build shared understanding as well as how to leverage frequent activities (e.g., hands-on training) to build this knowledge quickly and efficiently. A section of the trifold is devoted to how to make reception and integration counseling an important part of the process for building shared understanding as well. Two additional sections of the trifold handout include information about knowledge management and the importance of shared understanding in an Army context.

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Appendix
Research Product Trifold

Check out the inside for tips from experienced Army Squad Leaders about how to build shared understanding.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

During focus groups, seasoned Squad Leaders provided important insights on how Squad Leaders can leverage daily activities to bring new squad members up to speed quickly. Many of these suggestions can also be applied to ensure existing Squads maintain shared understanding. This guide includes suggestions for how to use regular activities to help facilitate integration of new Soldiers.

Developing shared understanding is one way to facilitate knowledge management. "The goal of knowledge management is to make information easier to find, which can make teams more productive and effective." (ATP 6-22.6) As a leader, you have the ability to guide and shape knowledge management within your Squad (ATP 6-01.1). Use the tips in this guide to foster a knowledge-sharing environment within your Squad to facilitate learning (ATP 6-01.1 1-49).

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATION

Integration = how fast a new Soldier becomes a true member of your Squad

When new Soldiers join a Team, Crew, or Squad there is a lot of information that needs to be shared to bring them up to speed. One of the purposes of reception and integration counseling is to familiarize new squad members with organizational standards, roles, and assignments (ATP 6-22.1 1-8). To preserve and maintain effectiveness, creating a shared understanding is especially important when Squad membership changes (ATP 6-22.6 4-4). Therefore, it's important to integrate new members quickly.

New squad members must quickly learn information about how the Army functions, about how to complete Squad collective tasks, and about what to expect from their fellow squad members. This knowledge can increase a unit's effectiveness and performance.

As a Squad Leader, you take responsibility for making sure the new squad member becomes an integrated member of your Squad through training them and mentoring them. To help with this responsibility, ensure you keep up-to-date on any professional development opportunities (e.g., Talk Like a Leader training) that may help you integrate new squad members.

Why develop shared understanding?

Shared understanding is a key component of Army Team Building (ATP 6-22.6). Development of a team begins with creating a shared understanding (FM 6-22 1-20). Squad Leaders should encourage collaboration and dialogue among their Squad to promote knowledge sharing and shared understanding (ATP 6-22.6 1-59). "This exchange increases shared understanding of the enemy, and the operational environment, problems to be solved, and approaches to solving them," contributing to the overall Army knowledge base (ATP 6-01.1 1-48). It is important to develop shared understanding after Squad membership change as well as maintain shared understanding within an existing Squad.

Shared understanding includes sharing of two different types of knowledge — explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge.

According to ATP 6-01.1, **tacit knowledge** is what individuals know, a unique personal store of knowledge gained from life experiences, training, networks of friends, acquaintances, and professional colleagues. **Explicit knowledge** is codified or formally documented knowledge organized and transferred to others through digital or non-digital means.

Sharing both tacit and explicit knowledge enables the Army to share knowledge and work together to support the mission (ATP 6-01.1 1-24).

Working together as a Squad during training can help develop effective units. There are two relevant characteristics of effective teams (FM 6-22) when establishing shared understanding within your Squad:

- Hold a shared vision about operating as a team
- Share information that may be useful to other team members

Teams that hold a shared understanding of the vision and purpose have better coordination and less conflict than teams that do not have a shared understanding (ATP 6-22.6 1-42).

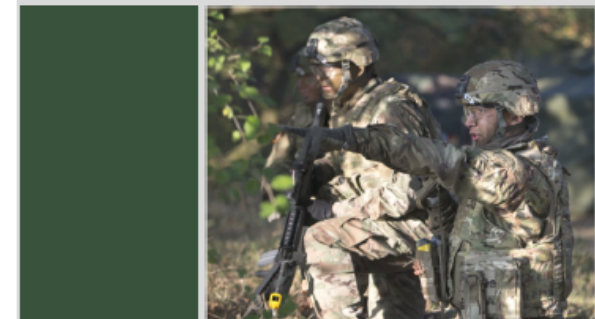


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A Guide for Enhancing Squad Shared Understanding: Squad Leader Tips

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Check Out these Tips from Squad Leaders for Developing Shared Understanding

DURING RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION COUNSELING

Integration counseling is the first and best opportunity to get a new Soldier up to speed. This is an important step in integrating a new squad member (ATP 6-22.6 2-6).

- Consult ATP 6-22.1 when preparing materials for counseling. Section 1-9 includes a list of content that should be included during the session. You can ask someone in your unit to share the resources they use. In most cases the process is similar for everyone, but you can take time to tailor the information to include unit-specific information (ATP 6-22.6 2-8).
 - Provide a call roster or other resource with information about how to contact leadership and others in the Platoon.
- Share information about the unit's mission during integration counseling (including how it relates to higher echelons and big Army) (ATP 6-22.6 3-7, 3-42) and universal Army standards like expectations for timeliness, uniform, PT, and rank and responsibilities (ATP 6-22.6 2-9, 2-11).
- Consider introducing new Soldiers to unit leadership and other squad members as part of integration counseling.
- Get to know the experience level of Soldiers during integration counseling. This time can be used for Soldiers to share what they know about equipment and share what positions they may have held previously. Knowing what skills Soldiers new to your Squad have will allow you to design a more effective cross-training plan (ATP 6-22.6 4-4, Table 4-1, A-4).
- Incorporate setting goals (both Army and non-Army) into integration counseling. For example, a Soldier may have goals of obtaining a college degree and/or advancing in rank.

REMEMBER

Integration depends on situational factors and Soldier factors. Situational factors include installation or unit OPTEMPO and command climate. Soldier factors include personality and past experiences. Because of all the factors present, remember that an effective method for integrating one Soldier may not be effective for integrating another Soldier (ATP 6-22.6 3-38).

Photo Credit

Top: Featured Photos. U.S. Army Flickr. SGT Seth LaCount. 16 NOV 2019.
Bottom: Spot the Enemy. U.S. Army Flickr. Paul Hughes. 17 OCT 2018.

DURING SERGEANT'S TIME TRAINING

Sergeant's Time Training is an excellent opportunity for new squad members to spend time with seasoned squad members. Below are some suggestions for how to use Sergeant's Time Training to bring new Soldiers up to speed quickly:

- Conduct classes on tactics, techniques, and procedures with new Soldiers. Follow classes with opportunities to train in assigned roles and cross-training opportunities for Soldiers to learn other roles on the team, building shared competence (ATP 6-22.6 3-15, 4-4, Table 4-1).
- Provide Soldiers with an opportunity to learn by allowing them to make mistakes in a safe environment. After a mistake is made, use the opportunity to provide correct instruction (ATP 6-22.6 1-25, 3-1, 3-31, 3-32). Take the time to further develop the new Soldier's shared understanding of the task.
- Use checks for understanding when training. Ensure that the new Soldier understands the task, the processes, and their role (ATP 6-22.6 3-8).
- Consider competitions between teams or team building activities as a way to build cohesion among your Squad. Example team building activities include paintball and rock climbing (ATP 6-22.6 3-41, 4-32).
- Incorporate doctrine and unit SOPs so that new Soldiers build a shared understanding of tasks and mission-related procedures.
- Across a variety of situations, use repetition to build muscle memory. This creates a deep-rooted shared understanding that allows Soldiers to more easily anticipate and react to events in different situations.

ON-THE-JOB KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Initial Entry Training (IET) and Advanced Individual Training (AIT) provide a solid foundation, but cannot cover everything a new squad member needs to know at an operational unit.

- Provide additional MOS, equipment, and task-specific training to new junior enlisted Soldiers once they arrive. Classroom-level training is enough for Soldiers to grasp the needed information for some knowledge. However, some tasks are best learned by doing (ATP 6-22.6 4-4).
- Soldier expertise is valuable if shared with other Soldiers (ATP 6-01.1 1-100). Encourage more experienced squad members with different backgrounds to informally share stories during down time to support understanding and connections between Soldiers. This will help communicate information about different situations and equipment that new Soldiers may encounter throughout their career.
- Give new Soldiers the opportunity to get to know their squad members better and build trust and cohesion (ATP 6-22.6). Bonding experiences make the integration process better for everyone. Although working together on tasks is a great way for squad members to spend time together and get to know one another, informal time spent together is also beneficial. Collaboration allows for establishment of personal connections, which builds shared understanding (ATP 6-22.6 1-60).
- Relate Army activities to real-world experiences to help new squad members understand the purpose of general tasks and the contribution that they make.

OTHER WAYS TO MAKE INTEGRATION MORE EFFECTIVE

- Share as much information as you can with Squad Members unless it's going to make it difficult or confusing for your Soldiers to complete their mission.
- Incorporate explanations when assigning tasks to help motivate Soldiers. For example, when sharing information include why something is being done and how the Soldier is contributing. This can help Soldiers understand the larger vision of the Army and the connections between their tasks to the overall mission (ATP 6-22.6 2-73, 3-6; FM 6-22 1-5).
- Reach out to the Soldier, if possible, before they arrive at the unit to start the process of having the new Soldier get to know you (ATP 6-22.6 2-8, Table 4-1).
- When integrating a new squad member, do not underestimate the effect spending time together as a Squad can have (ATP 6-22.6 3-39, 4-32). Even performing everyday tasks can strengthen bonds, improve morale, and build cohesion when the Squad carries them out together.
- Sit down as a Squad and have the new Soldier share what they know about battle drills and basic knowledge of weapons systems so others on the team have an idea of the existing level of doctrinal knowledge the new Soldier has (ATP 6-22.6 4-4).
- Give your new squad members a Joe sheet, or a new Soldier knowledge sheet.