



## Complementing the Officer

From the first moment of contact with the commander and other commissioned officers, noncommissioned officers/petty officers have the opportunity to show their abilities and determination to support and enforce the goals of the unit and to demonstrate effective leadership of the enlisted force. By doing so over time, NCOs/POs gain the trust of all the officers in the unit. One key competency for success in this critical role is the ability of the noncommissioned officer/petty officer to understand, pass on, and explain the *commander's intent*—that is, “the commander’s clear and concise expression of what the force must do and the conditions the force must establish to accomplish the mission.”<sup>1</sup> The ability of the NCO/PO to understand the commander’s intent, coupled with earned trust to execute it, is the foundation of the officer-NCO/PO relationship. This understanding greatly contributes to unity of command, ensures continuity of mission, and instills confidence that orders will be carried out promptly and effectively. The overall benefit from this method of operating is no disruption or loss of momentum to the mission in the absence of the commissioned leader. NCOs/POs make sure that the endstate will be reached in the face of whatever contingencies arise. This well-defined and well-understood relationship reinforces unit integrity, discipline, and overall mission accomplishment.

A positive and professional relationship between the two leaders creates and sustains healthy and productive organizational/command climate. These roles and responsibilities come with expectations of performance and sacrifice. Developing a positive and professional relationship between the enlisted leader and commissioned officer requires diligence and frequent self-assessment. NCOs/POs who enjoy

a close relationship with their officers find it one of the most satisfying parts of their service. It does not, however, privilege NCOs/POs beyond their station or position in the organization. It is important for NCOs/POs to remain grounded in supporting the unit's mission by complementing their officers and enabling the force. NCOs/POs must remember that performing the dual roles is not about them; it is about the men and women they support and lead. In the more senior NCO/PO ranks, a considerable amount of leeway is afforded to enlisted leaders and advisors because of the stringent selection process and their time in service, expertise, and experience.

There is but one commander of any given unit or organization. That officer, whether a lieutenant/ensign or a general/admiral, is in command. That officer's corresponding NCO/PO is a principal advisor, a source of competence and counsel, who enhances the officer's ability to command effectively. If NCOs/POs understand this time-tested concept and direct their efforts to those things that the commander needs them to focus on and to those matters they realize require their attention, they serve as force multipliers. This can be described as the *art* of the officer-NCO/PO relationship. NCOs/POs bring distinctive perspective and experience. They can assist with critical thinking, development of courses of action, implementation of decisions or change, and perhaps most importantly, they add the voice of the enlisted personnel to the discussion of issues facing the chain of command. NCOs/POs can forfeit the trusted advisor role quickly if they do not bring professionalism, maturity, and competence to the equation, or if they lose the proper perspective of that unique role. They must never appear to supersede the official chain of command or impede the force from accomplishing what needs to be done based on orders or guidance from the commander.

The Oath of Enlistment clearly defines the relationship with officers: "obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me." Even in this new century, with a mature all-volunteer force and substantially higher degrees of responsibility and empowerment of NCOs/POs, it must be clearly understood that the words of that oath are sacred, enduring, and binding. As much as some NCOs/POs prefer to use phrases such as *my unit* and *my decision*, the reality is that it is *our unit* and *the commander's*

*decision.* Commanders can—and often will—take into consideration the recommendations of enlisted leaders as they are making the final decision, but the responsibility to decide, and the expectation of loyal obedience, remains with the commander.

In military units, newly commissioned officers, regardless of Service, will benefit greatly from the advice and support of seasoned enlisted leaders who will help guide them in their role as the officer-in-charge or the commander of the platoon, flight, or section. Newly commissioned lieutenants or ensigns will become savvier over time, and through their own experience they will gain a more refined and informed perspective. That professional development and maturation can be shaped positively by the right NCOs/POs, who can have lasting, positive effects on those officers. At times, junior personnel may look at senior officers and wonder why they utilize their enlisted leaders in a certain way. Many times an officer's desire to empower an enlisted leader, or to minimize that enlisted leader's role, is a reflection of that officer's initial exposure to enlisted leadership. Officers will indeed weigh and measure NCOs/POs based largely on their exposure to NCOs/POs throughout their careers, but perhaps especially on their earliest relationships and experiences with NCOs/POs. The continued viability of the NCO/PO role depends to a significant degree on this first officer-NCO/PO relationship.

Newly commissioned officers usually come to the fleet, company, or squadron with an undergraduate degree but little military experience. Often the enlisted leaders in those units will have less formal education, but they bring a wealth of experience and technical competence that compensate for variances in education and narrow the gap between them and their new officers. Because of their increased complexity, the evolving roles and expectations of NCOs/POs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will require increasing their civilian and professional education levels without disturbing proven organizational integrity or diluting the status of either officers or enlisted personnel.

To be successful in building and sustaining this kind of relationship with officers, NCOs/POs must be *competent*, *credible*, and *capable*.

**Competent:** NCOs/POs are competent both in their specific skill sets or occupational specialties/rates and in the “tribal knowledge” of the units and what makes them tick. They have to be technically

and tactically proficient, better than their subordinates and ready to assume the next higher billet. Through their practical knowledge and ability to apply it to any given situation, they complement their officers and enhance both their own and the officers' performance. Taking the time to explain—and backing up the explanation with more than “that is the way it has always been done”—will add to the relationship and will be instrumental in the maturation of the officers with whom NCOs/POs serve. Through actions more than words, the enlisted-officer relationship will grow, and that growth will become the foundation for a powerful team.

**Credible:** Credibility—being worthy of belief or confidence—must be built over time and is extremely difficult to recover if lost. Especially in times of uncertainty, the credibility of the NCO/PO will weigh heavily in the officer's decisionmaking. As with any leader, when NCOs/POs join a military unit, parts of their careers or portfolios follow them from previous assignments. It is during this early assessment that their reputations and credibility are accepted—or not. This is likely the baseline from which they build or lose credibility within the command. Providing relevant recommendations will become natural with preparation and practice. Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the unit, and studying the mission and its people while understanding the commander's intent, are essential in that preparation and will assist in gaining credibility.

Regardless of the specific issues that may arise within the organization, a strong and productive officer-NCO/PO relationship based on trust will always contribute to success. Building and nurturing trust in this relationship are essential to good order and discipline, and *trust is the foundation of unit effectiveness*. What can be given can also be lost or taken away, so once that trust is afforded, it must be safeguarded. If that trust is ever lost due to inappropriate action, or lack of action, it is difficult to regain. The credibility of NCOs/POs is tied to the trust reposed in them. It starts with the officer trusting the NCO/PO to accomplish the mission without direct or constant supervision. The credibility of NCOs/POs grows in the eyes of officers when those individuals demonstrate that they are trustworthy. As credibility grows over time, so does trust. This only codifies an idea in a preceding paragraph: actions will speak louder than words.

**Capable:** Some NCOs/POs are competent, and some are credible, but what brings certain NCOs/POs to the forefront is that they are *capable*; that is, they are able to *apply* their expert knowledge (competence) to real tasks in the real world. Being able to teach tactics in a sterile environment is one thing, but can those same NCOs/POs execute those tactics when taking enemy fire? Are they capable of taking the information and applying it under conditions of stress and confusion? *Capable* NCOs/POs can perform at will, unsupervised, and produce desired results. More often than not, the capability the NCO/PO brings to the equation will be the difference between mission accomplishment and substandard results. When the NCO/PO possesses a known capability that can be directed toward a problem, that capability is a force multiplier for both the commander and the unit. Much like a good blade, it must be sharpened frequently to maintain relevancy. When used but not sharpened, it becomes dull and less useful. The most capable NCOs/POs work continually to improve their capabilities, and they become increasingly useful, indeed invaluable, to their officers, personnel, and families.

Competent, credible, and capable are the three Cs, used here to illustrate a well-rounded formula for enlisted leaders to execute their duties effectively. But *attitude* and *approachability* also play a significant role in the officer-NCO/PO relationship. It is said that “amateurs advertise.” The officers above the NCOs/POs, and the subordinates below them, will take notice and respond positively to quality leadership and a strong presence, but not to bragging or self-promotion. A good officer-NCO/PO relationship benefits from humility. If NCOs/POs are well versed in the Profession of Arms *and* have humility, their contribution to the officer-enlisted relationship will positively reflect throughout the command. If NCOs/POs aim for personal glory or accolades, everyone around them will see it. Broadcasting one’s self-image weakens leadership; it poisons the command climate. Officers appreciate humility in their NCOs/POs and value the ones who allow their abilities to speak instead of themselves. Being humble and getting the mission done without seeking personal recognition is a testament to the NCO/PO commitment to the Profession of Arms. This display of selfless and humble performance will endear them to the officer and will build trust and confidence in their relationship.

Being approachable is also key when dealing with officers, subordinates, and peers. NCOs/POs can be competent, credible, and capable yet still not be approachable. Approachable enlisted leaders encourage new officers to reach out to them to get their perspectives on issues. Unapproachable enlisted leaders have the opposite effect and may either unintentionally or intentionally discourage a productive officer-NCO/PO relationship. Some may label it as “burning a bridge.” If they have an approachable enlisted leader they can turn to, new lieutenants and ensigns will gain wisdom and grow in their professionalism. Being approachable is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of confidence and strength. Being approachable will facilitate synergy and help the NCO/PO guide the officer’s decisions, thus enhancing unit cohesion and effectiveness.

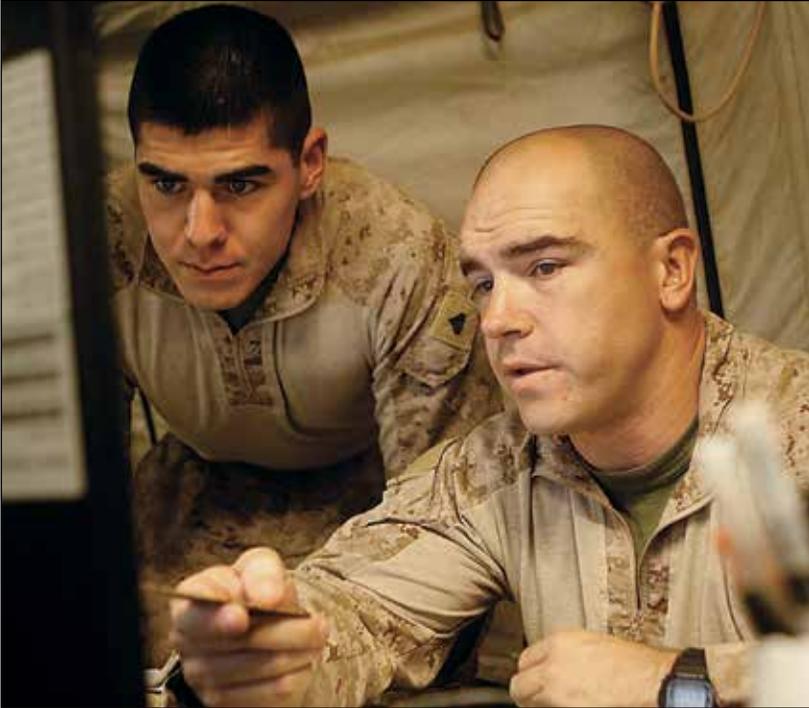
The commander and the enlisted leader have an obligation to be a moral backstop for all members of the organization. Specifically, the manner in which NCOs/POs behave in both their professional and their personal lives will set an example for all who observe them. This involves more than lip service to a policy or regulation. It encompasses the enlisted leader’s whole persona and will become infectious in the organization. Doing what is right—and not what is convenient—is a hard road to travel, but it will pay considerable dividends when ethical dilemmas confront leadership. Ethically sound NCOs/POs will become part of the conscience of the unit, and no one will want to let them down. In essence, the NCOs/POs can be the moral compass of the unit that will help keep it going in the right direction. It takes moral courage to set this example, but it is well worth the effort, and it will produce positive and lasting results for the entire force.

No man is an island and no leader—officer or enlisted—can expect or even hope to be effective, especially in moments of crisis and during trying times, without the support, faith, and confidence of others within the leadership team. The officer-NCO/PO relationship is a sacred feature in the Profession of Arms. It is built on mutual recognition of their respective roles and responsibilities, and a true appreciation of the contribution of each. An officer-NCO/PO relationship can be toxic, passive, or positive, but what each one brings to the table can have profound and far-reaching effects, from command climate to the overall capacity of the organization. While the relationship is a shared

effort, NCOs/POs are at their best when they nurture it through example, perseverance, and persistence.

*Note*

<sup>1</sup> Joint Publication 3.0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, 2011).



*Staff Sergeant John Wheeler teaches Corporal Cody Kapotak specifics about his military occupation in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, August 12, 2011. SSgt Wheeler is communications maintenance chief, communications platoon sergeant, electronic warfare officer, and the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program instructor trainer for 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Regiment (1/3). This deployment is his first time to Afghanistan, but his third deployment. Cpl Kapotak is communications maintenance noncommissioned officer for 1/3.*