

Enabling the Force

Enabling the force is one of the most important functions and responsibilities of noncommissioned officers/petty officers. All noncommissioned officers/petty officers are responsible and accountable for their own development, but most importantly they are responsible for the development of their subordinates. They contribute to the development of their peers collaterally, and in many important ways they contribute to the development of the officers with whom they serve. As Chief Master Sergeant Denise M. Jelinski-Hall, USAF, former Senior Enlisted Advisor for the National Guard Bureau, noted, the effort is well worth it: “Investing daily in . . . personal growth will yield extraordinary success.” From using creative and critical thinking to identify needs and courses of action to teaching “how we do something” and “why we do something,” NCOs/POs are the key players in the development, advancement, and sustainment of the force.

Leadership, regardless of level or status, involves managing tasks and relationships. NCOs/POs take the lead in helping their junior enlisted members focus on the task at hand, perform their duties to the best of their abilities, and develop productive relationships with the other members of the organization. NCOs/POs must understand themselves, their peers, their superiors, and most importantly the people they lead if they are to develop their subordinates into better followers and, ultimately, effective leaders.

Great leaders understand the importance of developing and maintaining professional relationships. These relationships allow leaders to understand the wants and needs of their followers and to ensure that the members of the force are properly cared for at work and at home. This attention promotes a resilient force capable of dealing with

adversity. The bottom line is that leaders take care of their people so their people can take care of the mission.

The U.S. Armed Forces are developed from within. Senior leaders are not hired from outside the organization; they rise from within their Services over entire careers. Therefore, it is incumbent upon leaders to develop subordinates who will one day be the successors to the very leaders who trained them. To this end, NCOs/POs develop their subordinates through teaching, coaching, and mentoring.

Teaching

Teaching—the imparting of information and knowledge—is a primary function for enlisted leaders. They are the teachers, and their subordinates are their students. In this relationship, NCOs/POs possess the necessary information and knowledge their subordinates need to succeed. They ensure that their subordinates possess the requisite knowledge for the day-to-day operations of the command or unit. This involves more than just teaching the technical aspects of their jobs. NCOs/POs ensure that their subordinates are properly developed in all aspects of their lives in order to accomplish their missions. Basic life skills such as individual and family financial planning and management, and mental and physical preparedness, all contribute to the mission readiness of individual Servicemembers.

The most essential subject matter that NCOs/POs teach is the *science* of the Profession of Arms—the basics, the nuts and bolts of military skills and competencies. Developing and honing proficiency in individual military skills and specialty expertise represent the sweet spot of NCO/PO roles and responsibilities.

Coaching

While teaching imparts information and knowledge, coaching focuses on developing and refining skills. Coaching involves overseeing the repetitive practice of skills until they are mastered. A key component of coaching is leaders' praise and constructive criticism of their subordinates. Coaching involves the determined effort to help subordinates develop the desire and capacity to achieve professional and personal

goals. Subordinates must be motivated, and NCOs/POs provide the inspiration. Enlisted leaders are role models for their subordinates. Forbidden in the teachings of any military leadership guide is the slogan, “Do as I say, not as I do.” Rather, the enlisted leader leads by example. Said in simpler form, *NCOs/POs live a life ready for inspection.*

NCOs/POs develop specific job-related competencies for their subordinates and work with them to clarify and refine their short- and long-term career and life goals. Helping subordinates develop strategies to deal with difficult people, and to manage difficult emotions in the workplace, is critical. Coaches provide feedback and encouragement. The endstate is learning, competence, and confidence.

The adage “watch one, do one, teach one” is paramount. Coaching is collaborative: leaders impart the required information and knowledge and then allow their subordinates to demonstrate their mastery of it, offering positive correction where it is required. NCOs/POs also empower their subordinates to become the coaches for the next generation.

In contrast to teaching, coaching involves a balanced mix of the art and science of the Profession of Arms. Only when Servicemembers have acquired the basic skills are they ready to begin to absorb the *art* of the profession.

Mentoring

Teaching imparts new knowledge, and coaching develops and refines new skills, but mentoring is the apex of subordinate development. While there is some science involved, mentoring takes both the mentor and protégé deeply into the art of leadership and the Profession of Arms. This is where wisdom enters the picture. Mentoring by more experienced professionals enables subordinates to tap into their own talents, traits, and resources in order to mature and develop not only as military professionals but also as human beings. A mentor-protégé relationship is complex, and it contains elements of both teaching and coaching. While mentors may be assigned, the best mentors are chosen—chosen by their subordinates because they embody the attributes and qualities to emulate. Mentors are often outside the formal chain of command, selected because of their reputation or observed

performance. Subordinates often seek out mentors who share common interests or values. As a mentor, an NCO/PO enhances a subordinate's knowledge and mastery of the job—and of life.

The NCO/PO mentor commits to the subordinate and vice versa because both are looking for a sustained professional relationship that will serve a higher purpose. For the NCO/PO, mentorship provides an opportunity to influence and develop the full potential of others. NCOs/POs draw on their wisdom and inherent knowledge—and those of their subordinates—to allow the rising generation to develop and flourish. More than skill acquisition and knowledge transfer, mentoring involves cultivating the whole person—values, passions, and goals. A mentor provides guidance and direction on setting and achieving goals and helps subordinates become more deeply steeped in Service cultures. The endstate is for subordinates to take on the essence of the Service ethos—the culture, philosophy, and way of life. Subordinates who are properly mentored are more committed not only to their careers, but also to their commands, their Services, and the Armed Forces. Everyone benefits from a good mentoring relationship.

Critical Thinking

One important aspect of professional and personal development is nurturing critical thinking, which involves developing and maintaining an analytical attitude. Responding to life-and-death situations—flooding on a ship, an aircraft emergency, or a firefight—calls primarily for reactive thinking, drawing on training and experience to make a sound split-second decision. In contrast, critical thinking is a more deliberate contemplation of decisions and anticipation of possible courses of action, and accordingly it yields better understanding and stimulates creativity. Critical thinking is a process by which leaders, as well as subordinates, evaluate decisions and actions to answer relevant tough questions and challenge assumptions.

Practicing critical thinking enables leaders to react more quickly, decisively, and effectively in moments of crisis or combat. As critical thinkers, NCOs/POs are adept at evaluating how they see the world. Accepting the status quo as a permanent condition ensures that the force will become stagnant. NCOs/POs challenge a specific method

of operating and then evaluate it critically with an eye toward greater efficiency and effectiveness. Critical thinking is perhaps most needed when someone says, “We’ve always done it this way.” This is when asking “*Why?*” is paramount; this is the time to evaluate whether the way of doing something is still practical and relevant. It then falls to experienced and wise NCOs/POs to make sound recommendations to their chains of command to ensure that the organization and force are always improving.

Enlisted leaders prepare themselves and their subordinates for the unknown. While training hones the ability to perform, education broadens intellectual capacity. Both training and education enhance the ability to anticipate and react to the unknown. The U.S. military owes its success to a long history of developing its people for the unknown. Not long ago, no one would have thought an attack over the Internet could cripple a nation. However, great thinkers—critical thinkers—anticipated this threat and initiated training and education programs that have enabled today’s Armed Forces to protect both space and cyber domains. As experienced and empowered leaders, NCOs/POs evaluate situations critically and understand the environments in which they operate. Then they ensure that they and their subordinates are trained, educated, and prepared to deal with unanticipated situations and scenarios.

Empowerment

People are empowered when they are encouraged to think, behave, decide, and act on their own. This empowerment does not spring up spontaneously. Rather, it must be fostered and instilled by leaders. Only when that is done do individuals come to feel genuinely empowered. This sense allows them to grow in self-confidence through a process of continuous self-development to remain relevant and sharp. With empowerment comes a higher form of accountability. In the Profession of Arms, power and accountability are inextricably linked: the more power and responsibility individuals have, the more they are held accountable. NCOs/POs are champions for empowerment within their commands. They ensure that subordinates not only understand and fully trust in this empowerment, but that they also put it to good use for the benefit of the organization or unit.

Self-development comes in many forms, and failure is one. Traditionally, failure is looked on as calling for punishment. In an environment of true empowerment, though, failure becomes an avenue for self-development, with minimal outside corrective action and rarely with punishment. Empowerment transforms shortfalls or mistakes from an occasion for punishment into an opportunity to learn. Therefore, NCOs/POs must adequately communicate this process to their subordinates. Failure through malice, negligence, or gross incompetence is not self-development and not part of the empowerment process, but failure through understandable human error, used reflectively and self-critically for learning, can be—and should be—part of the empowerment process.

It is up to NCOs/POs to fully understand their subordinates and their abilities, weaknesses, and willingness to take risks. This allows NCOs/POs to assign tasks and actions commensurate with their subordinates' abilities. Ultimately they are training their replacements, so they must ensure that additional opportunities open up for continuing the development process.

Force Development

Professional and personal development of subordinates requires a balance of specialized training (qualification, certification, and readiness) and professional education (expanding intellectual capacity) to round out a member of the Profession of Arms. The complex and rapidly changing environment of the 21st century calls for renewed attention to both training and education for the enlisted force. NCOs/POs are taking the lead in rethinking what is required for tomorrow's military.

As stewards of the institution, NCOs/POs understand that professional development involves more than training that leads to certification and qualification and education that leads to expanded intellectual capacity. It also includes the development of mental and physical readiness. The Profession of Arms depends on NCOs/POs to be exemplary role models, specialized experts, thoughtful counselors, competent career and life-skills advisors, and approachable coaches and mentors. NCOs/POs invest in their people, and by doing so, they yield a better professional and a better citizen. They encourage personal

growth through advocacy of off-duty education, realizing that a more educated subordinate is more likely to be a more effective leader. They lead and motivate their subordinates to meet and exceed physical standards because they know that physical fitness supports endurance and resilience. They challenge subordinates mentally because they know that doing so will result in a critically thinking warrior who can endure the stress and uncertainty of combat or crisis.

NCOs/POs embody and impart unyielding moral standards and values. They are responsible for what they do—and for what they fail to do—and for developing subordinates to do the same through teaching, coaching, and mentoring. As Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force James Roy stated, “The fundamental building block of leadership is establishing, communicating, and maintaining clear standards. NCOs are entrusted with the awesome responsibility of preparing young Servicemembers to meet joint force mission requirements.” They are guided by the importance of mission accomplishment and their responsibility to develop future leaders—leaders who will assume their place and continue to enable the force.



Helene C. Stikkel

Joint Service Color Guard advances colors during retirement ceremony of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Henry H. Shelton, Fort Myer, Virginia, October 2, 2001