
The Battalion Commander And Command Sergeant Major: The Most Important Senior Leaders in the Army

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Battalion commanders and their command sergeants major are the senior leaders responsible for leading soldiers and caring for their families at the very tip of the Army's spear, and they both stand in the nexus of a criti-

cal two-way communication system. As such, senior leadership at the battalion level (we use *battalion* as shorthand for all similar organizations) is perhaps the most important in the Army.

The Army designed the battalion level to capitalize on a unique combination of officer and NCO leadership. In terms of officers, battalion command represents the level at which commanders are prepared most for

the many challenges they will encounter. By the time an officer is selected to command a battalion, he or she would have already served in multiple leadership positions internal to the battalion—platoon leaders, company (or equivalent) commanders and staff principals. Most likely, the officer also would have graduated from Command and General Staff College and served as a battalion operations or

executive officer, possibly even as a staff officer at other echelons in Army or joint assignments.

The experience differential between battalion commanders and their subordinate officer leaders is huge, especially given the experience of the commander's partner in command: the command sergeant major. These two senior leaders use their experience differentially to guide their subordinates through the complexity of war at the tactical level. Squads and platoons win wars, but the battalion commander and command sergeant major are directly involved in the unit's day-to-day action. They lead face to face, commonly sharing cold, wet, tired, hungry and dangerous conditions with their soldiers. Leadership at the battalion level is a near perfect combination of experience and exposure to soldiers.

Furthermore, for members of a battalion—soldiers, young officers and NCOs, as well as aspiring mid-grade officers and sergeants—the battalion commander and command sergeant major *are* the Army. Both represent leaders who have “made it.” The leadership they exhibit, the caring they display and the command climate they set may very well determine whether a soldier reenlists or a leader stays in the Army. The standards enforced by the battalion commander and command sergeant major result in the discipline and tactical proficiency that succeed in battle—or not. Similarly, their discipline and leadership standards are responsible for the behavior of their soldiers, units and leaders out of battle, whether in theater or at home. No one can doubt that good or bad leadership at the battalion level has a profound effect on the whole Army, but they fulfill a second, equally profound role: a two-way communication conduit.

Battalion commanders and their command sergeants major transmit, and in some cases translate, not only their senior's tactical intent but at times operational and strategic intent as well. Battalions, by design, constitute the first echelon in the Army hierarchy capable of conducting independent operations, and they have been doing this routinely in combat for more than a

decade. Simply put, the Army's decentralized, Mission Command style is impossible when battalion commanders and command sergeants major cannot operate within the intent of higher.

In addition to this “downward” communication function, battalion commanders and their command sergeants major also communicate “upward.” Senior commanders, whether during their own battlefield circulation or via reports, rely heavily upon battalion commanders and command sergeants major for accurate—even brutally honest—descriptions and assessments. Such communications are absolutely essential to the coherency and efficacy of wartime command and form the grist for a fact-based dialogue among echelons of command, a dialogue that increases the probability that the organization as a whole has sufficient understanding and can, therefore, adapt its operations properly to the enemy and situation it faces.

Battalions are designed to function within the nested leadership of echelons of command, making battalion commanders and command sergeants major the communications conduit connecting senior generals to those who are responsible to execute orders



“The movies call it a cliff hanger, but the Army calls it teamwork.”

at the tip of the Army's spear. More than a decade of fighting has reminded all of us how important these two aspects of the battalion's organizational design are to success.

The Army's current position—with the fight continuing in Afghanistan and against al Qaeda and their affiliates, but with much of the force coming home to garrison life, budget cuts, force reductions and all the challenges that these changes will bring—is indicative of how important the design of a battalion and the role of its two senior leaders will be off the battlefield. The Army consists of three relatively separate but related generations of leaders: those commissioned or recruited since 2001, who only know an Army at war; senior leaders whose tactical experience was primarily defined by the post-Vietnam and Cold War Army; and those in between. The lines between these generations are not firmly drawn. Some individual leaders do span generations, but two important points emerge: The experiences of each generation create different perspectives, and battalion commanders and command sergeants major will be a vital bridge between these generations.

Battalion commanders and command sergeants major will, more than ever, require mastery of intergenerational communication, not only in terms of translating higher intent into action but also with respect to serving as a voice for a generation of young leaders who arguably already possess many of the adaptive and creative leadership traits the profession desires to cultivate. What these young leaders lack, and what senior leadership at the battalion level must provide, is the broader context and maturity to translate their wartime experiences into meaningful training essential for subsequent generations. Over the next few years, battalion commanders and command sergeants major must be expert in training and training management.

Also required are a set of senior command sergeants major, colonels and general officers who will use the Army's echelons as the two-way communication network it is designed to

be—at home, as they did in combat. The Army's senior leaders cannot make proper adaptive decisions that will alter institutional policies and programs unless those decisions are informed by the candor that emanates from the battalion level. Battalion commanders and command sergeants major are in direct, daily contact with the 9/11 generation of leaders; their voices must be sought, listened to and used.

As extensive as the battalion commander's and command sergeant major's experience are, however, battalion-level senior leaders need to understand the complexities resulting from the challenges the Army faces, the difficulties in finding balanced solutions to these challenges, the ratio-

nale for the adaptive decisions that the Army's senior leaders make, and how these decisions must be implemented. To transmit and translate senior intent, battalion commanders and command sergeants major must know and understand it. Active and robust communications down are as important as communications up.

Battalion commanders and their command sergeants major have carried a heavy load for the Army since 2001. They have led soldiers in tough fighting; they have cared for soldiers and families before, during and after 11 years of deployments. They have stood at the nexus of the Army's two-way communication system, translating the intent of their seniors into battlefield success and delivering accurate

reports to those seniors when necessary. As such, senior leadership at the battalion level has been the most important leadership in the Army. Over the upcoming years of transition, the battalion's leadership will retain its importance. □

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