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Strengthening a Pillar

by

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Of the three equally important pillars of the Army's leader development system — institutional training, operational assignments and self-development — the self-development pillar is the least understood. The foundation may be strong, but if one of the supporting principles is weak, the structure may crumble and fall. Though the concept seems simple enough, grasping the true value of self-development will go a long way in building our Army's leaders.

Institutional training and on-the-job experience are by far the success of the noncommissioned officer corps. But they cannot bear all the weight of leader development, which is exactly why the three pillars are of equal importance. We as soldiers and leaders help shoulder the load of training our subordinates through unit training and mentoring, and the schoolhouses throughout the Army dispense the institutional knowledge. The key to self-development is obviously "self." But do we receive or give coaching on the techniques required to expand through self-development?

College and correspondence courses are effective ways to develop leaders, but they alone will not ensure a well-rounded force. Looking at Army Field Manual 22- 100, *Leadership*, one sees only a small paragraph devoted to self-development. Like so many other important issues in our Army, why is there so little written on how to form an effective self-development program? We know one of the leadership principles is to "know yourself and seek self-improvement," but what is the standard for success? In a recent Rand study, hosted by the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, one of the recurring themes was that the self-development pillar needs to be strengthened. Obviously, if senior noncommissioned officers from throughout the Army and a top military think-tank believe this to be a problem, imagine the confusion at the first level of leadership, the squad and team leader.

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One earlier method that was developed to set a path for leader development was the “career map.” The career map was written for Career Management Fields (CMF), and specified “signposts” for developmental assignments, institutional training and self-development. It allowed the soldier to “map” their progress, with recommendations and goals for each skill level. Though it provided direction, the career map by itself was only a guide, focusing on additional institutional training.

For many of us, self-development is defined as taking the initiative to develop our own potential. And as one of our seven core values, Duty, it is our duty as noncommissioned officers to mentor our subordinates, to assist them in reaching their full potential. As in all endeavors, we must provide purpose, motivation and direction. By fully understanding the needs of our units, our specialties, our Army and our country, we have the power to succeed. We also have a duty to the Army and ourselves to realize our full potential. We should continually strive to become the very best leaders possible, taking advantage of all three areas of the leader development process.

The concept of self-development is more far-reaching than correspondence courses and night school. It is developing our minds and body through personal challenges beyond the duty day. It is studying our profession through field manuals, periodicals, trade papers and magazines. It is learning the history of our noncommissioned officer corps, our units, our regiments and our Army. It is belonging to and supporting service organizations and volunteering. It includes learning and expanding our knowledge base in a vast area relating to our job. If you want to develop your management skills, take a seminar or college course in management, then volunteer for an opportunity to apply those skills. Coach a baseball team or serve as a scout leader. Or seek additional duties from your chain of command. Or if you need to develop your technical skills, see if your career field has trade certification programs and earn your credentials. If your specialty requires special skills, determine if a degree plan is right for you. If it is general soldier skills you need to develop, the Army has a host of field manuals and references at your Learning Resource Center.

Setting up a self-development program for your subordinates or yourself is a simple task. But like any undertaking, it requires forethought and planning. By following these simple steps, you can be on your way to strengthening your plan for self-development.

- ◆ **Identify your goals.** You can determine your needs by conducting a self-assessment. Training Circular 22-6, *The Army Noncommissioned Officer Guide*, Chapter 3 (Skills, Knowledge and Attitudes), is a great starting point to determine competencies NCOs should possess at each rank level. Talk to your peers and superiors to gather their recommendations. Prioritize your needs based on the most critical first, and list them in the order of importance.
- ◆ **Develop a plan.** Now that you know what you need to do, determine how best to accomplish your goals. Decide which options are available to you and who can assist you in completing them. Talk with your supervisor during counseling sessions and seek feedback.
- ◆ **Research your objectives.** If you require assistance, determine who can provide it. You may need the services of professional counselors, agencies or units, so know what is available within your community.
- ◆ **Implement your plan.** Do not delay, act now. Once you set your mind to it, you must exercise the self-initiative required to complete your plan. There may not always be someone to encourage you to finish, so you may find yourself providing your own motivation.

- ◆ **Evaluate the results.** As time progresses or you rise in rank, you will need to reevaluate your goals. Do they still meet yours and the Army's needs? You may have to conduct additional assessments or even raise or lower your expectations. There are many factors that come into the decision process, such as assignment, time and resources available or career goals.

Self-development is an important part of leader development. We as a professional corps must strive to reach our full potential through all our endeavors. By applying initiative and self-motivation, we can ensure that through our development, we can maintain a trained and ready Army.

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