



Reinforcing the Foundation: The Importance of NCOs Learning the Staff Process

NO.26-1117
January 2026

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Reinforcing the Foundation: The Importance of NCOs Learning the Staff Process

The noncommissioned officer (NCO) serves as an indispensable pillar within the operations process, providing essential support and continuity to commanders and staff. Acting as the connective tissue of the organization, NCOs bring a wealth of practical experience, honed judgment, and adaptive problem-solving skills developed through years of direct engagement in complex operational environments. This depth of expertise fills a critical gap often present within staff structures, where theoretical planning may lack the grounding of field-tested insight.

“Noncommissioned officers are key enablers of mission command, and they must be trained in the mission command principles to effectively support their commander and lead their Soldiers. Noncommissioned officers are required to exercise disciplined initiative to make decisions and take actions to further their commander’s intent.”¹

CRACKS IN THE FOUNDATION

Despite the critical role of the NCO in Army operations, the professional, functional, and unit training plans do little to prepare NCOs to significantly contribute to a battalion or brigade staff. Whether it be Combat Training Center (CTC) rotations, Warfighter exercises (WFXs), or unit training, NCOs in staff positions often lack a fundamental understanding of the operations process or specific functions within their roles, which is leading to growing negative trends. This knowledge gap not only limits their effectiveness but also leads to a broader underutilization of one of the most potent combat multipliers available to the staff. NCOs’ operational insight and leadership potential remaining untapped and not fully integrated into planning and decision-making cycles diminishes the overall agility and effectiveness of the command team. The trend below is an all-too-common occurrence at the CTCs.

“In many units, NCOs contribute little or nothing to the planning process. This means that, arguably, the most experienced people are not assisting the staff during the military decision-making process (MDMP). Also, NCOs are often not included in critical meetings.”²

Trend: When NCOs within a unit’s staff lack a clear understanding of the MDMP and their functional roles, it often fosters a counterproductive staff culture. There are several recurring indicators of this type of environment, including:

- **Misallocation of Talent:** Staff officers and other NCO leaders often divert NCOs to secondary or administrative tasks during critical phases of planning, depriving planners of their potential contributions.
- **Underutilization of Experience:** Staff officers fail to incorporate the operational insight and tactical acumen of NCOs during planning development.

¹ Army Doctrine Publishing (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command*, 31 July 2019.

https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN34403-ADP_6-0-000-WEB-3.pdf. 02 October 2025.

² CSM Keune, K.; SFC Richardson, B.; SFC Morris, D.; et.al, *Sustainment in Support of Large-Scale Combat Operations*, Chapter 2, Center for Army Lessons Learned, 11 July 2022, Digital, 9 September 2025.

- **Lack of NCO Refinement in Planning:** Course of action (COA) development and decision briefs often proceed without the benefit of NCO input, resulting in plans that may lack realism or feasibility at the execution level.

Best Practice: To address these challenges and fully leverage the capabilities of NCOs in staff roles, units should do the following:

- **Codify Roles in SOPs:** Unit standard operating procedures (SOPs) must clearly delineate between deliberate and abbreviated planning processes. Crucially, they should define the responsibilities of all participants—including NCOs and junior enlisted personnel—within each phase of planning.
- **Institutionalize NCO Involvement:** Commanders and staff officers must empower NCOs to take an active role in planning, analysis, and refinement. Their inclusion should be intentional, not accidental.
- **Invest in Professional Development:** Enroll NCOs in the Battle Staff Noncommissioned Officer Course (BSNCOC) to build their planning proficiency. Upon completion, stabilize these NCOs in staff assignments to maximize the return on training and foster continuity within the planning team.

Why should we be training our Soldiers and NCOs in the operations process?

“Organizations often face sustainment manning shortages and a lack of key personnel. As such, every noncommissioned officer (NCO) must understand their position’s roles and responsibilities, whatever those may be. Organizations must maximize talent management across the formation to aid in current and future operational planning. Especially the crucial positions that, if left unfilled or filled by the wrong person, will cripple a unit during large-scale combat operations (LSCO).”³

In today’s rapidly evolving operational landscape, the traditional structure and manning of unit staff across all echelons are undergoing significant transformation. As technology advances and organizational designs adapt to meet modern requirements, it is inevitable that the composition and function of staff elements will shift accordingly. The Army’s push toward modernization and force structure realignment has introduced a growing trend identified in the *FY23 Mission Command Training in Large-Scale Combat Operations Key Observations*: the expectation that emerging systems will assume multiple sensor and analytical roles, thereby reducing the need for personnel in certain areas.⁴

However, this transition brings with it a critical challenge. As unit’s staff become leaner and more decentralized, the burden of expertise on the remaining personnel increases exponentially. This shift demands a deliberate and strategic approach to training—ensuring that every Soldier, and especially every NCO, understands the operations process and their responsibilities within that process.

³ CSM Keune, K.; SFC Richardson, B.; SFC Morris, D.; et.al, *Sustainment in Support of Large-Scale Combat Operations*, Chapter 2, Center for Army Lessons Learned, 11 July 2022, Digital, 9 September 2025.

⁴ Blome, Matt, *FY23 Mission Command Training in Large-Scale Combat Operations Key Observations*, Center for Army Lesson Learned, 24 April 2024, Digital, 24 October 25.

Ultimately, empowering NCOs and Soldiers through comprehensive training in the operations process is not just a matter of professional development—it is a strategic necessity. It ensures that units remain agile, informed, and capable of executing complex missions in a dynamic and resource-constrained environment.

CURRENT PROCESS

Currently, the Army relies heavily on the BSNCOE as the primary mechanism to prepare NCOs for staff roles. Although this course introduces foundational terminology, tasks, and design principles, BSNCOE does not fully prepare or equip NCOs to navigate the complexities of staff operations—let alone lead a staff. The course offers a valuable introduction, but it lacks the depth, repetition, and instructional rigor necessary to develop the practical know-how required to guide a staff toward mission success. This gap in preparation leaves many NCOs ill-equipped to meet the expectations traditionally placed upon them as subject matter experts (SMEs).

A WAY FORWARD

From the Basic Leader Course to the Sergeants Major Course, the Army invests significant time and resources into building the NCO Corps. A proven example of this approach is the Army Writing Program, which is embedded throughout the Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES). As NCOs progress through their careers, each level of institutional training revisits and reinforces their ability to communicate effectively—both orally and in writing. By the time an NCO becomes a senior leader, the NCO can present ideas to a wide range of audiences with clarity and confidence. Applying a similar development model to staff training presents a promising opportunity to better prepare NCOs for these essential staff roles.

The Army should apply the same method of instructing the Army Writing Program to the development of an NCO in a staff function.

As an NCO progresses in their career, curriculum should be adapted to continuously educate on the roles, responsibilities, and functions of an NCO serving in a staff. Embedding educational and practical exercises on the operations process within Professional Military Education (PME) would allow NCOs to apply their field experience in a structured learning environment. This approach fosters learner development, enriches operational understanding, and enhances the overall value NCOs bring to their units. Army University should consider incorporating the changes in NCO PME listed below.

DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Note: The suggested development plan below takes lessons from the Army's current NCO Battle Staff course and divides them into appropriate segments according to NCO's experience and relatable roles within a staff. The targeted result is an NCO that is knowledgeable and able to effectively contribute to the operations process.

Basic Leader Course: Describe the eight steps of Troop Leading Procedures (TLP) and their relationship to the MDMP, exposing small-unit leaders without staff experience a framework for planning and preparing for operations. Explain the eight-step process small unit leaders use to develop plans and prepare for operations. These lessons conclude with exposing students to FM 1-02.2, *Military Symbols*, developing an understanding of military symbols, and associated actions.

Advanced Leader Course: Provide administrative instructions for formatting and preparing Army plans and orders. Describe the types of orders and the requirements for planners in developing a plan or order. Reintroduce FM 1-02.2, *Military Symbols*, and develop an understanding for developing graphics and overlays and translating them into written orders.

Senior Leader Course: Discuss the MDMP and its application for a unit's staff. Provide an overview of the process followed by a detailed explanation for conducting each of the seven steps of the MDMP. List the techniques for modifying MDMP in a time-constrained environment. Describe to students how commanders and their staff build and maintain running estimates throughout the operations process. Develop an understanding of how to extract pertinent information from higher echelon orders.

Master Leader Course: Focus on developing an NCO's ability to manage staff, NCO, and officer staff structures. Reinforces lessons learned throughout PME. Organize the course to replicate an operational staff, focusing on repetitions of the planning process.

Sergeants Major Course: Define a sergeant major's (SGM) role in an operational staff in LSCO and garrison environments. Describe the nature of operations in which SGMs support their commanders and staff. Discuss operational art in relation to developing plans and orders for the conduct of operations at the levels of warfare. Instruct on the Army Design Methodology (ADM) techniques to support solving problems and further develop critical and creative thinking.

UNIT TRAINING

Although changes to PME can be a lengthy process, there are achievable COAs that units can take to support the training of NCOs in the operations process. Key to improving NCOs within a unit and their understanding of the operation process is commanders identifying the need. Noted from the CALL *Home-Station Training Handbook*, "Battle staff training is critical for ensuring units are prepared to execute their mission. Commanders must plan and conduct training for staff members to ensure they are proficient in their roles and responsibilities. This includes training METs [mission essential tasks], live-fire tasks, and other critical skills required for effective mission execution."⁵

⁵ Robert, B., Berryman; C., Sutton; S., Stermer, J., *Home-Station Training*, Chapter3, Center for Army Lessons Learned, 24 July 2025, Digital, 8 December 2025.

Commanders must empower their staff by delegating authorities, especially in terms of the NCO Corps. “When delegating authorities, the commander considers how to best employ the command sergeant major (CSM) during the conduct of operations. As the senior NCO of the command, the CSM carries out policies and enforces standards for the performance of individual training and conduct of Soldiers.”⁶ Empowering a unit’s senior enlisted Soldier to identify shortfalls and gaps within the NCO population allows for a top-down course correction in knowledge and training management, while also assessing potential candidates for roles within a staff.

Operations Sergeant Major Role

The operations sergeant major (OPS SGM) plays a crucial, yet often underappreciated, role in the development of NCOs. This position is essential for enhancing unit effectiveness by directly influencing training and operational readiness in garrison and operational environments.

A unit can leverage this capability by allowing the OPS SGM to oversee and hold Leaders Professional Development/Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development (LPD/NCOPD) events. This drives two key developments:

- One of the units’ primary SMEs enriches the education of the formation, training on current SOPs while drawing on years of experience that too often goes unnoticed or underrated.
- It offers staff an opportunity to explore processes that could quickly be codified into tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) based on lessons derived from the LPD/NCOPD.

Drills and Staff NCO Training

OPS SGMs may conduct One Up Drills by removing Staff Primary’s and allowing the NCOs and junior officers to fulfill those roles. The OPS SGM should lead the NCOs through the operations process while conducting as part a NCOPD.

Training Example:

The Wargame Tactical Decision Exercise:

- **Action:** Once a week, gather the available command post (CP) personnel (NCOs and junior officers) around a whiteboard. The OPS SGM presents a single, challenging tactical vignette.
- **Example Vignette:** “You are the battle staff. The main CP just took three rounds of 122mm artillery. (The S3 and XO are unavailable). The S2 reports a likely enemy reconnaissance team is within 2km of our position. You have lost communication with Alpha Company. What do you do in the next 30 minutes?”

⁶ Training Circulars (TC) 6-0.2, *Training the Command and Control Warfighting Function for Battalions and Brigades*, 30 July 2025, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN44461-TC_6-0.2-000-WEB-2.pdf.

- **Execution:** The OPS SGM facilitates the exercise, forcing the staff to talk through their immediate actions, reporting requirements, and battle drills. This is not about finding the “right” answer but about practicing the process of critical thinking and communicating under pressure and developing an understanding of the operations process.

Once the drill is complete, the commander and CSM should act as the briefing audience. This allows command teams to build trust in their organization and helps identify training needs and areas of proficiency, not only for the command team but also the NCOs in those positions. Commanders may use this time to reinforce how they wish to receive information, and NCO’s gain insight into how their commander understands and visualizes a problem.

Operationalizing Garrison Activities

The NCO Journal article *NCO Peacetime Role Preserves Combat Readiness* and CALL Newsletter 95-07 both strongly advocate for treating garrison activities with the same rigor and discipline as tactical operations. Time in garrison is not simply downtime; it is the primary opportunity to build the habits and systems that will be used in combat. The OPS SGM is the key driver for operationalizing the headquarters’ garrison activities.

Training Example:

Run the HQ on a “Garrison Battle Rhythm”:

- **Action:** Work with the XO and S3 to establish a formal garrison battle rhythm that mirrors a tactical battle rhythm.
- **Example:** The daily “stand-up” meeting should follow the same format as a tactical update brief, with each staff section providing a quick summary of their status and key actions for the day. The OPS SGM can manage this meeting, ensuring it is short, focused, and productive, directly countering the “dysfunctional meeting” trend.

Treat the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) SOP as a Living Document in Garrison

- **Action:** The TOC SOP should not be a binder that only comes out for field exercises. The OPS SGM should enforce its use daily.
- **Example:** All inbound information that is routed to the S3 shop are answered by the radio telephone operator (RTO) using the proper procedures outlined in the SOP. All significant events (e.g., a vehicle accident, a last-minute tasking from brigade) are logged in a journal just as they would be in the TOC. This builds the “process muscle memory”.

By actively engaging in NCO development and implementing structured training programs, the OPS SGM plays a vital role in enhancing unit readiness. Through practical exercises and the operationalization of garrison activities, the OPS SGM ensures that NCOs are well-prepared to meet the demands of garrison and combat environments.

Although training a staff can be challenging and require a balance of daily operations, a useful tool to assist command teams in this process is TC 6-0.2, *Training the Command and Control Warfighting Function for Battalions and Brigades*. This TC lays out a systematic approach to training staff and insights into the importance of the training. It would be beneficial to take the training listed and scale it appropriately to the NCOs within a unit to integrate it into a training plan. Although not as effective as an institutional training course, it adds value by exposing NCOs to and giving NCOs practical exercise opportunities.

CONCLUSION

By systematically exposing NCOs to planning and decision making throughout their careers, the Army can cultivate a Corps of staff-savvy leaders who are ready to contribute meaningfully to planning. This proactive investment reduces the need for ad hoc training and ensures that units are not expending limited resources teaching fundamental staff skills during critical operational windows. Whether the training happens at the institutional level or using readily available NCO experience, the need is paramount for future LSCO operations. Ultimately, this COA will empower NCOs to fulfill their potential as force multipliers, driving mission success through informed, experienced, and strategically integrated leadership.

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