

Down in the Dirt: leadership insights for battery, company, troop NCOs

By SGM Frank C. Cota Jr., ADA

As a leader who has spent what many would consider to be an inordinately long period of time leading at the section and platoon sergeant levels, I want to share some insights I gained during my years of serving at these levels. Though I sometimes felt destined to remain at the lower levels of leadership forever, this time served to make me a better and more adept senior leader now.

Every mission, task or event that happens in the Army is executed by the core of leaders at the section and platoon levels. These leaders are the nucleus of the key leaders whose knowledge and expertise are essential for the successful accomplishment of anything the Army must do.

In coming up through the ranks, I spent more than one-third of my time in section- and platoon-level positions. I served more than four years as a section sergeant and more than four and a half years as a platoon sergeant.

I truly loved serving at these levels, and the vast majority of my leadership and training tenets were formed during these years. My years of serving at both levels instilled in me the importance of the leadership and dedication that is crucial at these levels.

Section sergeants. First, for the section sergeant or section sergeant to be, serve with passion. Do not “go through the motions” of leadership or training, but commit yourself wholeheartedly to those

you lead. Understand everything you say and do is being scrutinized.

It is important Soldiers know you are genuinely concerned and dedicated to leading them and preparing them for combat. Almost everything that happens is done under your authority as section sergeants. Dedicate yourself to your Soldiers and focus time and energies on their needs and care.

Second, as a section sergeant, work closely with the other sections in the platoon. Now this may seem like common sense, but far too often the competition that is generated between sections also brings with it some negative aspects as well. Some examples are not sharing information or approaches to training, working in a void or vacuum because you want your section to be the best, or hoarding training resources or expert knowledge.

At the end of the day, our Soldiers are worthy of every bit of knowledge or expertise we can offer them. If it does not come from you, it should come from somewhere. If you truly understand yourself and your capabilities and shortcomings, work with the other section sergeants to strengthen your weaknesses. This enhances your abilities as a leader and also, and more importantly, strengthens and enhances the combat readiness of your section and the entire unit. Put your element before your ego; you and your section will be better for it.

Platoon sergeants. For the platoon sergeant, you are the foundation of the platoon. It is absolutely crucial

to provide sections sergeants with the guidance, experience and wisdom you gained from your years of service. Don't make assumptions about what subordinate leaders know and don't know.

Ensure you are present at every training event, task or mission, regardless of the size and scope of the event at hand. Mentor the section sergeants and help prepare them to take your position. Being “indispensable” as a platoon sergeant is never a good thing. Your presence should be felt, but over time, less often needed.

Platoon sergeants must encourage these same training, mentoring, and leadership tenets in their platoon leaders. These young leaders require as much, if not more, mentorship and guidance than your section sergeants, although not for the reasons you jokingly may be thinking about. These young leaders have a great deal of responsibility thrust upon them in their very young careers. Their successes or failures rest squarely with you.

While I was attending the Sergeants Major Academy, we were subjected to a great many speakers — some good and others not. Perhaps the most eye-opening and disconcerting things I heard came from two general officers at two separate speaking events. To look at on paper and hear what was spoken would not necessarily raise any red flags, but *how* they said it was what disturbed me the most.

It seemed to every NCO in the auditorium there was some disdain and contempt for the NCO Corps. The condescending manner with which they each spoke to 644 sergeants major was disheartening. One told a story of how a sergeant major had berated him as a young lieutenant, and the other answered several questions with a patronizing and disgusted tone. “Didn't you read my slide; it answers that question!” These lieutenant generals quite possibly had been mistreated as young officers. Of course, I can only speculate, however, there was clearly something that had affected their views and trust of the NCO Corps negatively.

I am sure many have heard things like “Hey LT, I'll call you when I need you, until then just sit there.” But NCOs, it's not about what you need; it's about what those young lieutenants need. They need your leadership, they need your guidance, they need your mentorship — and they need it right away.

The things these young leaders will do will affect more personnel over the long run than any other leader you will have influence over. Build that command team early. Build trust and build a strong relationship with those young lieutenants.

Ensure they are trained and involved in everything the platoon will do from the most exciting events to the mundane. You must involve them in all of it. One

learns by doing and not by sitting in a corner and watching.

These young lieutenants are our future commanders at all levels. Take the time you have as their platoon sergeant to ensure they trust and respect the NCO Corps — as we know it must be to set the right tone and attitude for the remainder of their careers.

You think we don't have influence? I refer once again to two bitter general officers who probably would argue to the contrary, maybe not publically, but privately. Some three decades later, their contempt and distrust of the NCO Corps was present and evident. Three decades of distrust and lack of respect.

We as NCOs cannot and must not allow this to happen. You get one shot at this with any one particular lieutenant — one shot, one chance to set the tone for a lifetime of leadership and service to our Soldiers and future leaders. Do it right and you have an ally for a lifetime; do it wrong and you have an adversary for a lifetime.

I wish you all the very best in your endeavors, leaders. Go out and lead your

troops and invest your passions, time and efforts in our troops who are deserving of our most diligent and concerted efforts. As one of my favorite leadership authors, John C. Maxwell, states in his book, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws Of Leadership*, “Leadership is built daily and not in a day.”

So please, go out, build and lead our nation and our Army's greatest asset — our Soldiers. ■

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SGT Vincent McGoldrick (right), 52nd Air Defense Artillery Battalion, pulls himself through a 25-foot sandpit on a Defender Challenge Course, Southwest Asia, April 25. Teams from different units ran the course, testing stamina, strength and brain power. (Photo by SrA. Brian J. Ellis, U.S. Air Force)