The Power of Informal Leader Development

By Scott Nusom

Introduction

Leader professional development (LPD) is a critical component for growing and progressing the Profession of Arms. Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 6-22, Army Leadership binds leader development into the Army leadership requirements model and Field Manual (FM) 6-22, Leader Development specifies the Army’s comprehensive framework for holistic development. Outside doctrine, professional articles addressing the benefits of professional development abound (here, here, and here). While structured LPD is critical to leader evolution, the less structured characteristics of informal leader development offers a viable second avenue for professional growth and can have a lasting impact on junior leaders as they progress through the military.

Supplementing Formal Leader Development with Informal Development

Commanders use formal professional development to cultivate subordinate leaders. LPD programs allow commanders to systematically prepare leaders for future events, thoroughly examine topics related to the art and science of leadership, and engage different levels of
leaders within their organization. Effective formal LPD events benefit from detailed planning, coordination, and command emphasis. With all of the notable benefits, two apparent challenges exist. First, many formal LPD sessions focus on larger audiences to maximize time and participation, especially above the battalion level. While involving an expansive audience has advantages, engaging all participants in meaningful discussion proves challenging. Second, competing priorities and time restrictions normally limit formal LPD sessions to monthly or quarterly interactions depending on the echelon. Like any other training event, hastily planned formal LPDs run the risk of degradation and diminished value, so commanders and their staffs must be deliberate when scheduling and executing these events. Encouraging a broad group to engage junior leaders through informal leader development addresses these challenges while simultaneously supplementing and enhancing command-focused development.

Informal development is fluid and adaptable. Events are less structured and more relaxed. The leader to led ration is normally smaller, promoting continuous interaction while enhancing the growth of professional relationships. Everyone involved in the process makes a voluntary commitment to participate. Experienced leaders, inside or outside the chain of command, willingly carve out time to develop subordinates. Additionally, a junior leader (or group of leaders) expresses an interest in supplemental growth. While informal development still requires a time commitment, preparation is less demanding compared to a formal LPD event. This allows participants to meet more frequently, for short durations, in smaller and more relaxed settings. Since informal development is mutual, subordinate leaders can readily request topics of interest or suggest areas of concern for their own self-development. At the same time, experienced leaders can deep dive into topics covered in the commander’s LPD program or conduct “opportunity development” aligned with limitations or weaknesses identified during constant observation and interaction with subordinates. The less structured events and the reduced group size create an environment conducive to engaging all participants in a level of dialogue and discourse that may not occur in a larger and more formal LPD. Leaders can conduct informal leader development in a multitude of
ways. Establishing reading groups, introducing weekly leadership vignettes, or focusing on reoccurring themes are just a few examples. Topics can run the continuum of focus from the history and culture of potential adversaries to the roles and responsibilities of company commanders. Informal leader development is fluid. If a leader observes something requiring attention or if a current event sparks the interest of a subordinate, leaders can easily adapt. Meeting during a brown bag lunch or connecting the development session with physical training and breakfast are ways to avoid scheduling conflicts during the duty day. Successful informal development simply requires flexibility, creativity, and commitment.

**Staff and informal leader development**

Staff assignments provide experienced leaders with countless opportunities to practice informal development. While commanders certainly focus on developing leaders outside their formal LPD programs, senior leaders on a staff are in an advantageous position to take on the role of informal developer. Staff composition, especially at the battalion and brigade level, blend a smaller group of experienced leaders with a larger collection of inexperienced or junior-level leaders. Unlike most company-level units, staffs represent a majority of the war fighting functions, increasing the scope of developmental needs and the likelihood that common interests exist. Although informal leader development can occur anywhere within an organization, individuals on a staff benefit immensely from this style of collaboration.

Many great articles exist scrutinizing staff leadership practices and focusing on informal leader development helps leaders break away from the “just row” methodology of staff work. (To read about the importance of leadership and staff, look no further than the surviving staff life section on the Military Leader blog.) Officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) on a staff do not get a respite from leadership responsibilities. No matter how hectic a staff schedule becomes, numerous opportunities to develop others exist. Although leaders are not always required to take charge of a formation, the requirement to develop is a constant. Staff assignments provide experienced leaders with a unique
opportunity to impact a wide-range of subordinates. Further, informal leader development can catch the officers or NCOs that may fall through the cracks of formal leader development programs. In a company-level organization, leaders often benefit from company, battalion, and potentially brigade-level LPDs. Conversely, if leaders on staff are not involved in the headquarters company LPD program, they are neglected one opportunity for development and may not have the chance to consistently participate in the higher headquarters’ LPD program. The absence of formal development can become especially problematic for battalion staffs that are full of early and mid-career NCOs, lieutenants, and junior captains. Senior leaders committed to informal development can make a lasting impact on this expansive and diverse group of leaders who require focused and consistent development.

Creating mentors through informal development

Not all experienced leaders will feel compelled to develop subordinates on their own time, nor will all junior leaders seek additional development. Since informal leader development is volunteer-based, only practiced leaders with a desire to develop and junior leaders striving to learn will choose to participate. These mutual pairings enhance the growth of professional relationships, as both experienced and inexperienced leaders are equally committed to the developmental process. Interactions are genuine, small, and motivated by a desire to improve. Over time, those professional relationships can eventually mature to mentoring relationships as the reciprocal trust between participants grow and the more frequent rate of informal development occurs.

Effective mentoring goes beyond teaching and coaching. Although leaders benefit profoundly from dedicated mentorship, finding the right mentor and establishing a mentoring relationship can be difficult. FM 6-22 defines a mentor as “a leader who assists personal and professional development by helping a mentee clarify personal, professional, and career goals and develop actions to improve attributes, skills, and competencies.”[1]
The Military Mentors Mentorship Guide explains mentorship as “a reciprocal relationship with both participants actively engaged in the growth of the relationship.”[2] While mentorship occurs throughout all levels of leadership, it is increasingly important for junior leaders to experience mentorship early in their career. Informal leader development and mentorship share several characteristics. As a result, a professional relationship between senior and subordinate can readily transition into an enduring relationship between mentor and protégé.

Conclusion

Commanders work diligently to create meaningful and engaging LPD programs and leaders at every echelon benefit profoundly from professional development. Nevertheless, commanders only have an infinite amount of time to plan and execute formalized leader development. Supplementing structured LPD programs with informal leader development increases the capacity and knowledge of less experienced leaders, serves as another meaningful avenue of professional growth, and encourages broad and diverse group of leaders to participate in the development of others.

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