

## 5 Ways to Maximize Your Broadening Experience at a Center of Excellence



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In Forrest Pogue's [\*George C. Marshall: Education of a General\*](#), Pogue explains how General George C. Marshall reflected on his experience training and educating officers, both at the U.S. Army Infantry School and with the National Guard, as instrumental to his development. General Marshall describes those teaching opportunities as fruitful experiences that allowed him to build long lasting relationships with leaders that he would later select to command Corps and Theater Armies in World War II.

When the U.S. Army selects leaders to become instructors, it is important to take a long term approach to the assignment. Even more so when serving at another warfighting function's (WfF) Center of Excellence (CoE), where fellow instructors and students may be more experienced in employing that particular function. You will likely be the minority

officer in every room.

However, rather than viewing this discrepancy in experience as a challenge to overcome, take advantage of it as a learning opportunity. Lieutenant General (Retired) Richard Trefry opined that part of being a “great soldier” is to also be a “great teacher.” When assigned as a small group leader to another CoE, gaining expertise to instruct is challenging but achievable. Throughout our time as CoE instructors, we learned the following five points and believe they can help all leaders thrive at any CoE, even one outside their own functional area.

**1-Remain humble.** When serving at another warfighting function’s CoE, we don’t only represent ourselves, we represent our branches. Stereotypes will precede you. Students, instructors, and distinguished visitors will challenge your knowledge with questions during discussions. Read, take notes, reflect, discuss, and read some more. Students gain little if an instructor is not reading, critically thinking, and reflecting on the assigned readings in the advance sheets or lesson plans. Take advantage of being an outsider and provide valuable feedback to improve the institution. Compared to the other instructors, you will likely be the only officer who did not graduate from the career course at that CoE. You have the unique ability to compare two different institutions and affect change within your current CoE. You will have to maintain balance, bring best practices from your warfighting functions CoE, but maintain an open mind as to how they do things.

**2-Learn the pertinent doctrine.** Part of your credibility as an instructor will come from your ability to understand the CoE’s warfighting function. No one expects you to change your branch, though some may joke, but you have to understand enough about the warfighting function and how it relates to a higher commander’s concept of the operation. Read the warfighting function’s primary doctrinal manuals. Additionally, since you may be the only representative from your branch, you need to be an expert in your warfighting

function as well.

If you have neglected doctrine since graduating your Captains Career Course or taking command, now is the time to make it a priority again. Get on board with the direction of current doctrine, read Field Manual 3-0 (Operations), and provide feedback to the CoE as they update their doctrine to nest with FM 3-0. FM 3-0 offers a large menu of command and support relationship to choose from, but the bottom line is you are either in a supporting role or in a supported role.

When you're in the supporting role, learn your higher headquarters' or warfighting function's terminology. As an example, I can recall a medical service instructor discussing an "FST" and I remember wondering what a Fire Support Task (FST) has to do with a medical plan, but she was referring to a Forward Surgical Team (FST). Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 1-02 (Operational Terms and Graphics) is the language of our profession, but all of the CoEs use words from different sections in that book. They may be different, but do not let them be foreign - learn the terms and graphics relevant to your warfighting function CoE.

**3-Understand the operational environment.** The system is slow. Accept it, move on, and find peace. The institution teaches over 10,000 officers and Non-Commissioned Officers a year, so the institution's leaders must be deliberate about any changes to the course. Dramatic changes to the curriculum take time to develop, refine, pilot, refine again, and implement. Conversely, as the Combined Arms Center (CAC) updates and publishes doctrine, instructors must update classroom products and references to reflect these changes. The system is slow because the risk of getting it wrong is extremely high. Before you recommend a change, make sure you research and understand its potential impact.

**4-Refine your writing skills.** Most CoEs have professional magazines, journals, and staff writers and editors; seek them out and write. Brainstorm with your peers and write. The

CoE will benefit from hearing another perspective. You may be the only officer from your branch serving at your CoE. Write to share your experiences and lessons learned with the broader force. We constantly hear from senior leaders about the need to improve our writing and communication skills. Take advantage of these resources to do just that. In addition to CoE resources, there are plenty of online forums led by leaders dedicated to the profession that are willing to help you write and share your experiences and thoughts. A few examples include [3x5 Leadership](#), [From The Green Notebook](#), and the [Military Leader](#). Take advantage of the opportunity you've been given at the CoE to practice and refine your briefing and writing skills.

5-Leverage the experience of the DA **civilians**. There are a lot more Department of the Army (DA) civilians and contractors integrated into the training at Fort Lee, Virginia than either of us thought before arriving. DA civilians and contractors are professionals looking out for the long term benefits of the institution. When interacting with civilians, relationships matter. If you are a jerk, your peers will know. If you are good guy or gal, people will know. Choose the latter, because there will be a day you need help. The civilians at your CoE may know what has been tried before or why the CoE evolved to operate the way it does in its current state. Civilians have a large amount of institutional memory. Don't be afraid of leveraging their experience and continuity to get things done.

Use your experience teaching at a CoE as an opportunity to become a better leader. Learn as much as you can from as many people as you can and take what you've learned back to the operating force. As we look to the past for trends, almost every Corps commander during World War II served as an instructor at a PME school. Your time as an instructor can prepare you for your next PME requirement and operational assignment as a battalion or brigade operations or executive officer. Understanding other warfighting functions and developing relationships with SMEs from these warfighting functions will pay huge dividends when your unit depends on your ability to solve problems related to this expertise. By remaining humble, learning the vernacular, refining your research and communications

skills, and leveraging civilians' longevity, you can make the most out of your time at another CoE.

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