



By CSM Michael S. Burke

At the qualification range, a group of Soldiers congregate during the lunch break. Unexpectedly, a Sergeant Major descends upon them. In his growling voice he barks about their uniform deficiencies and how the range is not to standard. As quickly as he appears, he vanishes, and for a few minutes, Soldiers awkwardly stare at each other thinking, “what the hell?” The proverbial Sergeant Major storm did little to change the unit, and the Soldiers resume their meal and continue as if it never happened.

The role of the senior noncommissioned officer is not ensuring all Soldiers have eye protection and reflective belts or ensuring the lawns in their footprint are pristine, fixing deficiencies using the “leadership” methodology described above. Young Soldiers across the Army picture master sergeants and sergeants major holding coffee cups, spewing anger, and never actually doing anything. The problem with the senior NCO leadership is this image and the fact that they’ve made this image a reality!

When senior NCOs see a unit’s problem with standards and discipline they think it’s a problem that can be fixed right away with a spot correction, but in reality it is a systemic problem of failing to develop the unit’s NCOs and aspiring leaders. NCOs in a unit not

enforcing standards either don't know the standards or are ignoring them. A senior NCO can go around making all the spot corrections in the world; it will never fix corner cutting, shortcomings of communication, and lack of discipline.

The senior NCO's job is to establish the standard, outline the expectations, and develop leaders across their formation. This leadership eventually trickles down to the most junior Soldier. However, the current methodology of leadership from the first paragraph and perception of senior NCOs is something leaders must overcome to fulfill their roles.

Here are five ways senior NCOs can enhance the image of our profession and, more importantly, improve their unit.

Get out. Emails can be checked at a later date. The window to engage with Soldiers is limited, while access to a computer usually is not. Running effective meetings frees up space to see Soldiers. Identify quality engagement opportunities that maximize presence across the formation.

Speaking with the leadership and disappearing to another event before engaging the Soldiers who are actually doing the training doesn't change perceptions. Ensure leaders understand the expectation that battlefield circulation is an opportunity to see training and highlight the great work of leaders and Soldiers in their formation.

Teach. In most cases, the senior NCOs are the most experienced tacticians, with the most deployments, live fires, and combined training center rotations. Offer techniques, tactics and best practices to make the event better. Share this wisdom with not only the NCOICs, but with the most junior Soldiers. Attack the negative images of senior NCOs from both angles; from the top down and the bottom up.

Even if the senior NCOs aren't experienced in their Soldiers' field, their perspective can help them understand the bigger picture and relevancy of the tasks or training.

Listen. Establish two way communication with Soldiers at events. People like to talk about what they do. Learn about them, their concerns, issues, and complaints. Don't interrupt, listen and take notes to fall back on and read later.

Ask leaders and Soldiers what help or resources they need. This is something a senior NCO can impact immediately. Helping to fix problems with range control, logistics, line unit and staff relations, and coordination between units is NCO business.

Remember the people you talk with don't see the world from the same lens as a senior NCO.

When responding, do not belittle or be condescending, you will lose the battle for personal respect, damaging the reputation of the senior leadership position.

Make the Correction. Any unsafe acts need to be corrected immediately. However, in most cases, there is another approach than the sergeant major storm. Meet with the leadership before departing. Have a professional conversation with NCOs discussing the issues and why it's important for everyone to enforce the standard. Enable and empower the NCOs to make the correction. It doesn't matter if leaders agree or disagree with the standard, it's the NCO's job to enforce them.

Finish by highlighting a positive. The first engagement and the last will be the two things people remember. It is easy for anyone to dwell on the negative, but at most training events, there are good things happening. This may be the only time that Soldier sees their senior NCO leadership and that impression will stick for a while.

Follow up. Before visiting the unit again, reflect on the notes taken. Address the issues and concerns, and follow up with unit leadership if they people weren't at the event. Send an email to leaders to reinforce the message. The next time there is an opportunity to observe the unit, see if things changed.

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