EARNING THE TITLE OF FIRST SERGEANT

By Sergeant Major Dale J. Dukes

"Every Soldier has a sergeant, and every Soldier deserves a leader who is a capable trainer, is trustworthy, is genuinely concerned for their health and welfare, and develops them to be the leaders of tomorrow."
—Training Circular (TC) 7-22.7, *The Noncommissioned Officer Guide* [1]

Learning to lead Soldiers is a developmental experience that is often challenging, as it demands commitment, willingness to assume risk, and self-awareness. We learn from our past experiences, aiming to make every lesson learned count.

The experiences that I had while wearing the rank of first sergeant illustrate the leader development process and highlight the challenges associated with it. I would like to share my perspective on the commitment to helping individuals become better Soldiers and young leaders through the "lesson learned" concept. Sharing experiences (positive or negative) is crucial to supporting and driving the next generation to become successful leaders.

As a first sergeant, I learned to grow from the challenges associated with the position. This experience ultimately helped me become a better leader and prepared me to explain the importance of the leader development process. Throughout my journey, I have learned that it is essential to pursue relationships based on mutual trust, building cohesiveness, and supporting our officer counterparts in establishing a positive organizational culture.

The Opportunity

According to *Developing the Future of the NCO Corps Through Education: NCO Common Corps Competencies (NCOC3),* "The [first sergeant] is the direct leadership level senior [noncommissioned officer] NCO and normally the most experienced Soldier in the organization. The [first sergeant] is the primary tactical advisor and is an expert in individual and NCO skills. The [first sergeant] advises the commander on operational planning, coordination, and supervises all logistical activities that support the unit mission. A [first sergeant's] level of experience makes them an integral part of the unit command team, directly influencing policy development, training development, and enforcing standards and discipline within the unit."[2]

In late 2014, I had the opportunity to become a first sergeant for one of the Army's four historically coveted airborne military police companies. I received an email from a command sergeant major with whom I had previously had the honor of serving; he asked me to come to work for him again. At the time, I was deployed with a special-mission unit in the Middle East. However, I genuinely wanted to be a first sergeant and had prayed for the opportunity. Therefore, I replied to the command sergeant major's request, explaining my current situation and describing the projected timeline for completing my current mission before accepting the position.

I was aware of the many responsibilities and challenges associated with being a first sergeant. I vividly recalled a piece of advice that I had received from a previous first sergeant—a former mentor of mine, First Sergeant Joe Bayne (Retired): "The day you are ready to be a first sergeant will be the day of your outgoing change of responsibility." Those valuable words made sense to me many years later. Regardless of how ready a leader may believe he or she is, the true test is on the day of his or her change of responsibility. Prior to this, leaders familiarize and remind themselves of the duties and responsibilities of the rank/position for which they have been entrusted to serve. Reflecting on my own past experiences, it is amazing how much I gained through trial and error.

The intrapost transfer, lateral promotion, and change of responsibility all happened approximately a month after my return from overseas. I knew that my most challenging times were ahead, but I was eager and ready for those challenges. I was assigned to the company that needed the most improvement in the battalion with regard to personnel and equipment readiness. The former first sergeant had created an uncomfortable and distrustful cultural climate within the organization. I began to have some doubts and feel some regret about leaving my last position to take on such a difficult task, but I understood that the next step of my journey was not going to be easy and that there was no turning back. After all, I had already sewn on the "The Diamond," also known as the "pierced lozenge." If I were going to be successful, I knew that I would need a partner and commander who understood the importantance of character, competence, and commitment and who would prioritize those attributes.

My Battle Buddy

The NCOs and leaders within what was now my company had not been making decisions in accordance with the commander's intent, resulting in a loss of trust, micromanagement, and delays in daily operations. There were problems with the organizational philosophy of mission command due to the lack of empowerment for subordinate decision making and the corresponding failure to decentralize execution down to the lowest level. The company commander had a "Type A" personality that clashed with that of the former first sergeant. They did not see eye to eye on many company concerns, and the commander wasn't intimidated by opposing opinions. He had been slowly pushing the first sergeant out and assuming his duties. The commander was essentially running the company without a first sergeant.

But the NCO Leadership Competency indicates that "The Army relies on NCOs capable of conducting daily operations, executing mission command, and making intent-driven decisions. NCOs must lead by example and model characteristics of the Army Profession."[3] So when I assumed the role of first sergeant, I knew that I needed to assess the unit through close monitoring and evaluation of its training and operations. I observed unit operations for a few days before I understood the deficiencies and was prepared to determine what corrective actions were needed. The NCOs had become timid, rarely making decisions without guidance from senior leaders—even for simple tasks. Because these key leaders waited for guidance and/or approval for nearly everything they did, the commander had lost trust in NCO performance in general. Instead, he had begun covering many of the responsibilities of the first sergeant, including holding formations; reviewing and completing administrative and readiness reports; and conducting the unit Army Substance Abuse, Physical Fitness, and Body Composition Programs.

I was aware that I was the new guy in the company and that earning trust would take time, but the NCOs needed to perform their duties and rebuild the trust and confidence that had been lost. I remember walking into the commander's office one morning and respectfully requesting to reclaim the duties and responsibilities of the first sergeant. The commander had no reason to believe in me at that point, but he allowed me to have my chance. I knew that I had to show him that I could handle the job in order to earn his trust and respect. It would be a challenge to gain his support, but I knew that I would need it to improve the working relationships between the NCO support channel and the chain of command. I was determined not to fail.

At first, leaders from across the organization often attempted to slip past my door and approach that of the commander when I wasn't looking, to ask questions or seek guidance. But I began to hear him say, "Is First Sergeant tracking?" or "Have you run this by the first sergeant yet?" This was great validation that I was beginning to earn his support. The commander began to understand that I had the best interest of the organization in mind, and I consulted with him to obtain his guidance, intent, and desired end state before executing tasks. I ensured that I always incorporated his ideas when briefing other leaders. It took time and consistent performance to earn the trust and respect of the commander. But that later inspired me to shift my focus toward working with the unit NCOs and lieutenants.

Subordinate Leaders

While I was attempting to gain the trust of the commander, I also encountered challenges in working with platoon sergeants and platoon leaders, who had been accustomed to dealing with a senior enlisted leader who was rarely present, gave little or vague guidance, or just simply did not care about the organization. I knew that the best way for me to influence these Soldiers and leaders was to lead by example. I understood that I needed to "talk the talk, walk the walk," as I was the standard-bearer for the Soldiers who were watching my every move. I was aware that I needed to prove my technical and tactical competence as a military policeman and senior leader in order to earn trust from my subordinates.

I instructed my subordinates to begin bringing their issues to me (rather than directly to the commander) prior to command review and approval. I did this not with the intention of being controlling but, rather, to help improve products, avoid wasting the commander's time and, ultimately, restore trust in the first sergeant position. In the weeks that followed, many questions came through my office. Leaders tested my knowledge and proficiency. They began to realize that I could answer their questions and/or provide the guidance that they needed in order to remain aligned with the commander and the mission. I helped them improve their concepts of operations, risk assessments, and storyboards before the commander reviewed them. I was heavily involved within the unit. As time progressed, the leaders realized that my intentions were good and that my actions resulted in improved efficiency in planning and resourcing, ultimately allowing the commander more time to command the entire organization.

The Troops

The Soldiers are the workhorses, and I needed for every single one of them to trust their leaders and for all of us to row in the same direction. I was not placed in the position for them to fear me, to be their friend, or to socialize with them while off-duty; I was there to be their first sergeant! I had their best interests at heart, and I proved that I was there to stay.

According to Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Developing Leaders*, leaders have a significant impact on Soldiers when they focus their efforts, providing the purpose, motivation and, at times, inspiration necessary for those Soldiers to go beyond their individual interests.[4] Keeping this in mind, I spent many hours leading all of the activities I could, from foot marches and physical fitness tests to law enforcement and airborne operations. I worked many late nights, weekends, and holidays covering law enforcement shifts so that my Soldiers understood that I cared. It was my duty to look after them and to work with them on goals that would help them get promoted and become future leaders.

In 2015, we completed a remarkably successful Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, Louisiana, rotation, which elevated our status and boosted the Soldiers' morale. I chose to capitalize on that high level of morale by spending additional time with them individually to help them prepare for their promotion boards. This resulted in 14 consecutive months in which 100 percent of the eligible Soldiers were recommended for promotion.

The Results

It took nearly a year of my leadership style influence for the company to run like a well-oiled machine. By the time the commander gave his outgoing speech, he was able to say that the last 5 months were the best of his command. As the company and our new commander began to see the fruits of our labor, the morale continued to rise and the accolades kept coming.

The Soldiers achieved and maintained personnel and equipment readiness levels above 90 percent. Six NCOs and two officers attended and graduated from Jumpmaster School. Members of the organization won several consecutive battalion and brigade NCO of the Quarter Awards and the 2015 and 2016 battalion NCO of the Year Awards. In 2015 and 2016, the battalion held an organizational day fitness challenge in which our company attained the highest fitness score in the battalion; as a result of these and other accomplishments, the company was selected as the recipient of the 2016 Forces Command Eagle Award and Brigadier General Jeremiah P. Holland Award.

In the end, the hard work and mentorship had unlocked a true potential, inspiring young leaders to achieve at a level above and beyond the minimum standard. And their achievements provided me with a sense of accomplishment in having earned their trust and respect. Soldiers began asking, "Hey Top, what are we doing today?" or "What's next, boss?" And I loved it! However, the commitment and hard work that it takes to reach that point can adversely affect other parts of one's life. It was a difficult balance keeping Soldiers motivated while also spending time with my Family at home.

The Consequences of Success

In spite of all the professional success, recognition, and awards that we experienced as an organization, ongoing challenges that many did not see or hear about took place behind the scenes. As our professional success continued to rise, there were some things within my personal life that began to fall. My own scale, with Soldier on one side and husband/father on the other, had been unbalanced for quite some time; and at this point in my career, I was giving nearly everything to the U.S. Army, prioritizing my career over my Family. Those difficult sacrifices that were needed to achieve the mission that I had set out for my unit had finally caught up to me. I was now facing personal relationship failures at home. My spouse was no longer willing to tolerate my continued absence, and my marriage was hanging by a thread. My relationships with my children were strained. All the time and commitment that I had given to serving the U.S. Army at the expense of my personal life resulted in a marital separation. This is when I realized that even though my work life was thriving, I had failed to strike a proper work-life balance—something for which we do not receive any training within our career field.

Soldiers, peers, and superiors considered my performance to be excellent. Looking back, I didn't see my performance as a first sergeant as the best of my career—but I was competitive, and I owe a lot of my success to the incredible Soldiers and leaders who were by my side throughout this experience. I believe that the success of the company while I was first sergeant contributed to my selection for attendance at the Sergeants Major Academy. This was an honor, and many might think that I would be ecstatic to share the news with my Family. But the harsh reality was that it was too late to repair damage that I had done in my personal life. I went to my next duty station and embarked on the next leg of my journey alone.

Conclusion

Being a first sergeant can be exciting and challenging. There is nothing like having a company full of unique and remarkable individuals who have a genuine interest in working together to achieve a common goal. Building strong and cohesive teams based on mutual trust among individuals is vital to the success of any organization. No matter how long or short your time in the position may be, there is a great deal to learn during your first tour as a first sergeant. Nevertheless, there are good and bad consequences to the decisions you will make—consequences that will affect the lives of your Soldiers, your subordinate leaders, and even your Family. I have learned what military success looks like, but mine came at the expense of my Family. I encourage you to find the proper work-life balance. Remain aware of the needs of your Family and do not neglect those personal responsibilities while you're accomplishing great things and fulfilling the needs of the Military Police Corps and the Army. Reading about experiences like these and subscribing to the lessons-learned concept will help reduce the likelihood of repeating the same mistakes. I have vowed never to make that mistake again, and I hope that you can learn from my hard lessons.

Endnotes:

[1]TC 7-22.7, *The Noncommissioned Officer Guide*, 1 January 2020.

[2]NCOLCoE Bulletin No. 1-19, *Developing the Future of the NCO Corps Through Education: NCO Common Corps Competencies (NCOC3)*, The NCO Leadership Center of Excellence and U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, <https://wwww.ncolcoe.army.mil/poratals/71/publications/ret/1-19-ncoc3.pdf>, accessed on 17 May 2023.

[3]"The NCO Leadership Center of Excellence Presents: NCO Common Core Competencies," <https://www.ncolcoe.army.mil/portals/71/administration/Q%3d%3d|>, accessed on 17 May 2023.

[4]FM 6-22, *Developing Leaders*, 1 November 2022.

Sergeant Major Dukes is a senior military police sergeant and senior instructor at the Sergeants Major Course, NCO Leadership Center of Excellence, Fort Bliss, Texas. He holds a master's degree in adult education from Pennsylvania State University, University Park.