Officer Professional Development: A Case Study in Officer Mentorship

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Introduction

One of the key responsibilities of leadership is the training and development of subordinates, and this includes mentoring. However, with the high operational tempo of today's Army, it is often difficult to find the time to set aside to mentor. This article describes one approach taken to foster technical and tactical excellence in junior officers assigned to the Health Physics Program (HPP) of the United States Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine (USACHPPM). While the strategy discussed may not be fully exportable to all commands, it may provide some insights on how to tailor a mentoring program within other AMEDD units.

The USACHPPM is located on Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD. The USACHPPM's mission is to ensure promotion and protection of health for the Army worldwide. Located within the Directorate of Occupational Health Sciences at USACHPPM, the HPP retains the Center's expertise in health physics, or radiation protection. The program has 26 members including military, civilian, and contractor personnel. Of the six military assigned to the HPP, five are Medical Service Corps (MSC) officers holding the Area of Concentration (AOC) 72A, Nuclear Medical Science Officer: one lieutenant colonel (the Program Manager), three captains, and a first lieutenant.

With the exception of the Program Manager, all of the 72A officers are currently in their first duty assignment. This important fact underscored the urgent need for a formalized mentoring program that could address both officer fundamentals and enhanced technical training in health physics. Not surprising, the biggest challenge was developing such a program around deployments, temporary duty (TDY), and the ongoing distractions and demands of each duty day.

Officer Professional Development (OPD) Program

Since it was first established in the summer of 2000, the HPP OPD Program has greatly evolved. While it originally began as an informal "chat session" between the HPP Program Manager and his junior officers, OPD has since become a more scholarly, formalized program. Jealously guarded by the participating officers as "their time," OPD is presently composed of weekly meetings with an early start time (0700 on Thursdays) to minimize interruptions. A constantly updated schedule is managed by one of the junior officers and any scheduling conflicts are resolved on an as needed basis. These gatherings are intentionally informal, filled with good coffee, stimulating discussions, and officer camaraderie.

It is important to note that the weekly OPD sessions are held as long as at least one junior officer is available to meet with the senior officer. Those particular sessions are specifically tailored to fit the interests of the junior officer and become a personalized, one-on-one session. For example, one such meeting focused on potential future assignments for one captain; a second session dealt with strengthening another officer's officer evaluation report support form. When the senior officer is not available, the next ranking officer leads the session, thereby reinforcing the importance of the chain of command and ensuring OPD continuity. Besides, offering the junior officers this opportunity to mentor is, in and of itself, a form of mentoring.

Presently, the OPD is comprised of four types of sessions: The Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) Official Reading List, Military Topics, Health Physics Journal Club, and Guest Lectures. Ideally, since there are usually four Thursdays in each month, an attempt is made to vary the meeting format with one of each type of session. A brief description of the varied formats follows.

The CSA Official Reading List (1st Session)

In Jun 00, General Eric K. Shinseki released a reading list to help in military professional development.[1] His list, containing 40 books, is divided into four focused sub-lists: one list for cadets, soldiers, and junior noncommissioned officers (NCOs); a second list for company grade officers and NCOs; another list for field grade officers and senior NCOs; and the final readings are focused towards senior NCOs and leaders above Brigade level. It was the second list, targeted for company grade officers and NCOs, which became the cornerstone of the OPD program. Smaller books are read and then discussed in their entirety during the Thursday morning sessions; larger books are broken into "bite-sized" blocks (approximately 200 – 300 pages at a time) that are read and then discussed within the allotted time of an hour and a half. If time runs out, which occasionally happens, the discussion is carried over to the next week's session.

Traditionally, the first OPD meeting of each month is dedicated to the discussion of the CSA Official Reading List (although this can be changed based upon TDY schedules and mission requirements). Responsibility for discussing the books is rotated among the junior officers who are fully responsible for leading their sessions. In honor of this fact, the junior officer leading the discussion always sits at the proverbial head of the table.

This format combines the study of military history with enhancement of skills in preparing and leading small group discussions. Attempts are made to relate the readings to current events or Army operations (like the war on terrorism). This direct linkage serves to introduce relevance to the readings while cultivating a deeper appreciation of how the American military profession has evolved over the past three centuries. The discussions are dynamic and allow everyone ample opportunity to contribute and practice effective listening skills.

Military Topics (2d Session)

Since all of the junior officers in the HPP have received direct commissions, they are all brand-new to the Army. Consequently, their prior Army experience is limited to what they learned during the brief AMEDD Officer Basic Course. Therefore, at least one OPD session each month is always dedicated to exclusively military topics. A few examples of subjects discussed so far include ethics, values, leadership, and officer-enlisted relations. While some of these military sessions include select readings from field manuals like FM 22-100, Army Leadership, and Army professional journals such as *Military Review* and *Parameters*, others have included case studies, "war stories," and other real-world examples. (For example, when the topic of ethics was presented, the senior officer shared personal ethical dilemmas that he faced and how he dealt with them. In this way, the discussions are more germane.) Although the senior officer chooses many of the subjects for these sessions, other topics requested by the junior officers are also integrated into the OPD curriculum. The goal of these military topics is to further junior officer development as soldiers and future Army leaders while making the process both relevant and interesting.

Health Physics Journal Club (3d Session)

While 72As are MSC officers, they are also health physicists. The profession of health physics is a rigorously scientific one, requiring continuing study and practice in order to maintain technical proficiency. To assist in preserving this unique professional competence, one OPD session each month is normally dedicated to a health physics topic. Typically, this is accomplished in a Journal Club format. The Program Manager selects a pertinent article from an appropriate technical journal (such as *Health Physics* or *Operational Radiation Safety*) and the officers all read the article. Discussion during the OPD session then focuses on assigned reading and how the specific topic relates to operations within the Army. The Journal Club format is also useful for times when the Program Manager is TDY or on leave. These technical exchanges help to maintain the officers' scientific competency while assisting them in staying abreast of ongoing developments in the profession of health physics and radiation safety.

Guest Lectures (4th Session)

Finally, the OPD schedule is rounded out with guest lectures. Invited speakers to the OPD have included the USACHPPM Chief of Staff (who explained the officer promotion system and promotion boards), the USACHPPM Company Commander (who shared the challenges of a Company Command), as well as retired

Army officers (who reflected upon their diverse and distinguished careers) and senior NCOs (who discussed NCO Evaluation Reports and enlisted career management and development issues). Each of these guest speakers brings his or her unique expertise, along with a fresh perspective. These gatherings also provide some variety and acquaint the junior officers with other senior officers and potential mentors. It also allows these senior officers (typically non-72As) to participate in the shared leadership responsibility of junior officer mentorship.

Field Trips

In addition to the weekly Thursday meetings, the OPD program also includes field trips. One important, recurring field trip is an annual pilgrimage to PERSCOM in Alexandria, VA, to meet with the 72A Career Activities Officer (CAO). This annual meeting includes a review of each officer's officer record brief (ORB) and microfiche and a discussion of upcoming promotion and retention boards and potential future assignments. The CAO makes any corrections to the officer's ORB on the spot, thereby keeping the records up-to-date. The senior officer attends these career counselings along with each of the junior officers to maintain familiarity with each individual officer's career and to offer any needed guidance.

A number of field trips have also been made to visit senior 72A officers within the Baltimore-Washington area. (This was curtailed after 11 Sep 01, but has since resumed.) These informal courtesy calls allow the junior officers to meet other senior officers in their AOC and get an idea of future assignments that they may have later in their career. On the other hand, the senior 72As get to meet the new junior officers, describe their jobs, and share their thoughts on Army officer responsibilities. It is hoped that these meetings will serve to "break the ice" and facilitate future opportunities for mentoring between these junior and senior officers.

A final component of the field trips is touring historic sites. One such example was a trip to the Pentagon (before 11 Sep 01). Another field trip included a lecture and guided tour of the Gettysburg battlefield sponsored by a local Community College. These excursions serve to complement the military history readings with "actually being there" (In addition to getting everyone out of the office for a change of scenery). Future field trips planned include Fort McHenry, the National Cemetery at Arlington, and the U.S. Army War College. Fortunately, all of these locations are mere day trips from Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD and are, therefore, very convenient.

Summary

Developing subordinates is a leader's inherent duty. However, finding the time to mentor in today's fast-paced Army remains an ongoing challenge. The HPP OPD program at USACHPPM is a modest attempt to effectively meet both technical and tactical development needs of junior Nuclear Medical Science Officers. Topics range from those that are purely technical in nature to exclusively military subjects. The OPD program combines scholarly reading with small group discussion and field trips. Feedback from the participating junior officers has been unanimously positive and several other junior officers outside of the HPP have made inquiries about also participating.

While implementing the OPD program has raised officer morale and esprit de corps within the HPP, it is important to note that any long-term benefits of this program may not manifest themselves for years, if at all. Perhaps, that is why mentoring is much like gardening, both age-old pursuits require an abundance of nurturing and patience.

Although the authors hold no illusions that the approach presented is a panacea for the Army's mentoring problems, we genuinely hope that some of the ideas offered here will assist others struggling to fulfill their mentoring responsibilities in today's busy Army. That being said, with minor adjustments, the format presented should be readily adaptable to fit most of the other AOCs within the AMEDD. Given the climate of the Army today and recent concerns about junior officer retention, mentoring our future leaders is even more critical that ever before. It is that simple, our junior officers deserve no less.

Finally, a long-time mentor once said nearly a quarter century ago: "You always find time for the things that are important to you and in that way you make them important." That being said, if mentorship is truly important, one will find the time to make mentoring a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Reference

1. General Eric K. Shinseki "From my Bookshelf." Mil Review. 2001:Vol LXXXI, No. 2, 72-78. (***http://www-cgsc.army.mil/milrew/English/MarApr 01/bookshelf.htm***).

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