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The Sergeants Major Course at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy is the pinnacle of the NCO Education System. But though its graduates are certified as world-class experts in the art and science of operational leadership, a recent survey



indicated they are not as wholly prepared for strategic leadership roles, such as those of sergeants major working alongside general officers. To remedy the disparity, USASMA is working with the U.S. Army War College to develop additional courses for nominative CSMs to make them better senior enlisted advisors for the commanders they work alongside.

It all started with a survey. Prompted by Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III, the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command queried selected nominative-level sergeants major and general officers to discover, in a broad sense, if sergeants major were meeting generals' expectations. The responses exposed gaps in the education of sergeants major after they graduate from USASMA, said its commandant, Command Sgt. Maj. Rory L. Malloy.

"When you are a battalion or brigade sergeant major, you're really focused heavily on the operational level. But, when you start working for a general officer, a transformation has to take place," he said. "Our developmental system is really

good. But when you get to the top, there's a huge gap. One example is you can't operate as a directive-type of leader, where you're in there pounding on people — 'Do this and do this now.' Instead, you have to be more influential, and your leadership style must become more persuasive. It gets very complex at the strategic level because you have tons of stakeholders involved. But nowhere do we develop a sergeant major to do that."

Educating sergeants major in what generals have been taught

To meet the needs of general officers at the executive (one- and two-star) and strategic (three- and four-star) levels, USASMA at Fort Bliss, Texas, teamed up with the school where officers become strategic leadership experts — the U.S. Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, Pa.

"They understand what generals have been taught, and they've been developing strategic leaders for far longer than we have," Malloy said. "Because they own that curriculum, they can figure out how best a sergeant major can augment and support a general."

And a sergeant major well-versed in strategic leadership is vital to a general, said the War College's commandant, Maj. Gen. Anthony Cucolo.

"When I was commanding U.S. Division-North in Iraq, I needed my command sergeant major to operate at that level with me as much as my two one-stars and as much as my chief of staff," he said. "Every member of a command group needs to be operating at the same level. ... You need things like understanding grand strategy, how strategy turns into policy, the economics of warfare, and oral and written communications so you can go toe-to-toe intellectually when you get put into those positions."

But currently, command sergeants major about to start a nominative position must either learn on the job or seek out mentors to learn the ropes on their own. That model is inefficient, said Command Sgt. Maj. Malcolm Parrish, who earlier this year became the first command sergeant major assigned specifically to the War College.

"Everyone is beginning to see that sergeants major can be of greater use if they are in-the-know, educated and exposed," Parrish said. "But what we're doing now is, 'You're now a nominative sergeant major? Go figure it out.' And some people

are really good at it, but some people are not so good.”

“Right now, it’s dependent on an individual like me reaching out to a general, to someone you trust, to become a mentor or provide advice,” Malloy said. “But it’s got to be a little more formalized and professionalized than that.”

Making CSMs ‘instantaneously value-added’

To that end, the Army gathered at the War College last month the top individuals involved in senior NCO education for a summit to determine how best to teach nominative sergeants major.

“During the summit, we looked at what the gaps were,” Malloy said. “What were we currently doing? What are those main objectives we’d like to see come out of this as we move forward? We came up with about 13 items, and now we’re going to start assessing what we think the learning outcomes need to be and how we’re going to deliver this to make it resonate.”

Upon Army approval, USASMA and the War College plan to create two additional courses beyond the Sergeants Major Course and Structured Self-Development 5 — one that will prepare sergeants major for executive-level positions, and one for strategic-level positions.

“We’re going to take advantage of ‘white space’ on the career timeline of a noncommissioned officer, between the Sergeants Major Course and the Keystone Command Senior Enlisted Leader Course, which is more of a joint-oriented course” taught at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., Parrish said. “We want to take the opportunity of that white space and put courses that will better prepare a sergeant major to be instantaneously value-added, instead of having a learning curve for a period of time after assuming the position.”

The goal would be to teach sergeants major to think beyond the scope of their own units, Cucolo said.

“Imagine a command sergeant major armed with strategic context, knowing how things work culturally, both in Washington and regionally. When he or she does battlefield circulation, the ability to articulate the commander’s intent, to help other noncommissioned officers execute mission command, to listen to Soldiers’

issues and problems and put them into strategic context — I think the sergeant major can give much better advice to the four- and three-star commander if they are armed with that knowledge.

“Let’s say you’re sitting in a meeting, and the commander is perplexed by how to attack a problem, and the root of the problem is funding,” Cucolo continued. “If the command sergeant major at least has a working knowledge of the different ‘colors’ of money that make up the national defense budget, and understands how to maneuver, take advantage of opportunities and deal with challenges, the sergeant major is able to give better advice.”

But the aim is not to create enlisted-general officer hybrids, Malloy said.

“We’re not trying to make sergeants major think they are generals,” he said. “It’s just that the focus and the level has changed. Troops have to see that, too. How do you sit in a staff meeting and talk at the strategic level? When the commander’s not there, how do you deliver a strategic message as if he or she was delivering it? And how do you then go and take a knee next to a machine-gunner and still be able to connect to him? That’s the hard piece.”

Cucolo said maintaining the distinctiveness of each role — commander and command sergeant major — is part of the Army’s tradition.

“The thing that will not change, that cannot change, that I hope never changes is that bond between the officer and the NCO team that is near-peer,” Cucolo said. “The only reason it’s not *peer* is because of the commission the officer holds and the officer being held to just a slightly higher level of responsibility and accountability. But there’s that hard-to-describe near-peer professional relationship that allows my sergeant major to say to me, ‘Sir, that’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,’ and me needing to hear that. But we have seen mistakes where officers have treated NCOs as equals, and NCOs treated officers as equals. The profession must maintain the heritage of that relationship. And I believe NCOs will rise to the occasion if the institution supports their development.”

For Chandler, the new courses directly relate to one of the key tenets of the Army Profession he’s promoted during his tenure as sergeant major of the Army — competency within the profession of arms.

“Even as senior leaders, we never stop learning,” Chandler said. “Better-educated

sergeants major working at the nominative level will better serve Soldiers, better serve the mission, better serve the command, and be better assets to the general officers they're working with."

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