



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY
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16 JUL 1976

SUBJECT: Role of the Noncommissioned Officer

Commander
TRADOC
ATTN: ATPR-HR-OE
Fort Monroe, VA 23651

1. In accordance with your request, the Office of Military Leadership at the USMA has reviewed the packet of letters and comments on the role of the NCO. The review by OML considered the issue from an organizational behavior perspective as it appeared that this approach would best complement the other data and opinions you have gathered.
2. The attached review essentially addresses the following considerations:
 - a. Power and authority: are they balanced? Does the traditional authority match the institutionally legitimate power?
 - b. The CSM as a role-model: does he represent a desirable model and goal for the career NCO?
 - c. The CSM as a boundary-role figure: does he aid in communication and cooperation between officers and enlisted or unintentionally subvert these goals?

FOR THE SUPERINTENDENT:

1 Incl
as

Keith R. Bushey, CPT
for FREDERICK R. POLE
Colonel, AGC
Adjutant General



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The concern expressed by the Commanding General, Training and Doctrine Command appears to be based upon three related questions:

1.1.1 What are the duties and responsibilities and the extent of the Command Sergeant Major's power as perceived by others in the Army?

1.1.2 What are the actual duties and responsibilities of the Command Sergeant Major and what is the real extent of his legitimate power?

1.1.3 If the two are significantly different, what actions should be taken?

1.2 Examination of the comments received by respondents to GEN DePuy's 24 December 75 letter and the duties, responsibilities and legitimacy of the CSM as established by Army Regulation 600-20 suggests that there is cause for concern. There is a seeming discrepancy between perceived authority and institutionally specified authority. In addition, there is the implicit suggestion that many commanders favor a clarification of the CSM's role, the concern being that the CSM may in individual instances become a figurehead, realizing "less than 50%" of potential. In effect, the absence of "hard", institutionally specified roles have made it easy for officers to usurp the traditional functions of the CSM.

1.3 This paper will examine the organizational implications of the CSM's development through historical precedent, examination of present roles, and the possible effects of several alternative courses of action.

2. BACKGROUND: SOCIAL/HISTORICAL ANOMALIES

2.1 The 1964 American College Dictionary defines the Sergeant Major as ". . . the senior non-commissioned officer in charge of the enlisted clerical force in a regimental or similar headquarters." A British perspective is reflected by the 1971 Oxford English Dictionary: ". . . a non-commissioned officer of the highest grade. . . strictly speaking, not a 'non-commissioned officer', but a 'warrant officer' is an assistant to the adjutant." The latter definition scarcely does justice to the peculiar place of the Sergeant Major; the US Army's contemporary usage would imply more power but explicitly grant less.

2.2 The rank first appeared in Cromwell's New Model Army of the English Civil Wars, and was not strictly speaking a non-commissioned grade as we know it, since it described a field officer next in grade to the regimental lieutenant colonel. His duties fell within the purview of what we would call S1-S3, and he was senior in rank and prestige to a regimental captain.

2.3 The schism between commissioned and non-commissioned officer arose later as a reflection of the social and economic milieu existing in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The only elements of the population which could be spared for the pursuit of war were the surplus nobility provided by strict primogeniture and the lowest socioeconomic classes. The structure of the British Army thus quite logically came to mirror the face of the greater society. As the creature of its culture, its effectiveness was legendary.

2.4 The presumption is made that the United States Army from the beginning reflected the traditions of its progenitor, and in a traditional and structural sense this appears easily supportable. However, as the US Army's historians (e.g., R.F. Weigley) have noted, the formal notions of the British structure as it reflected English society soon ceased to be an appropriate model for the American environment; mimicry, rather than constructive adoption. The form remained despite the lack of a clearly identifiable American aristocracy to provide material for a commissioned officer class as socially distinct from enlisted sources.

2.5 Given this societal difference, it is hardly surprising that the traditional form is not a perfect fit. Nevertheless, the "colonial's" perception of the senior noncom's traditional stature as the real administrative power in the unit invests the supergrade NCO--particularly the Command Sergeant Major -- with higher expectations than it may be fair to expect him to handle. ?

3. THE PRESENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

The US Command Sergeant Major program was established at least partially to upgrade the prestige of the NCO Corps. The traditional example of the British NCO seemed especially attractive at a time when the unity and vitality of the US NCO Corps seemed in decline, and the rest of the Army appeared on the verge of going down with it.

3.1 If the American CSM is not the direct counterpart of the British Army's Sergeant Major/Warrant Officer/Assistant Adjutant, then what is he? Comparison of duties and functional areas suggested by the Army Regulations on the subject, the comments of the respondents to the TRADOC letter, and the experiences of the reviewers imply that the CSM's role is essentially twofold. He is a role-model and goal for career noncommissioned officers, and boundary role personality between the commissioned and non-commissioned grades.

3.2 As a role-model, the CSM presents an ambiguous target. The power and prestige of the CSM emanate from the counterpart commanding officer in the legitimate sense that the CSM is the direct enlisted representative of the commander. However, the apparent delegation of the commander's power is not legitimately based, since the CSM, unlike his junior counterpart, the platoon sergeant, has no place in the chain of command. In addition, the delegation may be one of dignity rather than power, and the CSM may have to be satisfied to bask in the reflected light of his commander. The Staff Sergeant Major has a job which, as has been observed, can be defined. To an unbiased observer (that is, one unfamiliar or unmoved by the traditional aura of the supergrade NCO) may interpret the CSM's real function as that of a vestigial "strap-hanger". If, at worst, the CSM's power exists only in the eye of the beholder, then the entire question of authority and responsibility for the CSM may become increasingly hard to pin down. In this case, his function as a role-model for the aspiring career NCO may be called into question.

3.3 Operating on the boundary of commissioned and noncommissioned worlds, the CSM performs a number of tasks: he is a coding and filtering agent, acting by habit almost as a translator between the officer and enlisted soldier. He filters, interprets, and passes on information from the commander along a path parallel to the channels of command. He represents the noncommissioned officer establishment to the commissioned officer and in some cases to society. He also may serve as a buffer between the two estates, absorbing, deflecting and protecting the enlisted chain of information and responsibility from the transient impulses of the commander, and often blocks disruptive energy from below before it troubles the commander.

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3.3.1 These boundary roles seem to fit the overall view of the CSM; however, some shortcomings are inherent in them. First, the purpose of his interpretive, informational function should be to close the communication gap between officer and enlisted; yet paradoxically, the very presumption of a need for an agent at the boundary may in many cases serve to widen that gap. It seems doubtful that any device which creates or dramatizes such a gulf may be more destructive in the long run than a simple dialogue between the commander and his soldiers -- not his "officers-and-enlisted", a gap which does not reflect parallel distinction in the societal base.

3.3.2 The existence of parallel lines of information flow -- Battalion to Company Commander to Platoon Leader to Platoon Sergeant to Squad Leader and CSM to First Sergeants to Platoon Sergeants to Squad Leaders is superfluous and counterproductive. Any such state of affairs which increases the number of exchanges of information from one recipient to another merely increases the number of opportunities for confusion and misinterpretation. As a rule, most of us would allow that clarity is best served in the passage of information by reduction of the number of transactions. If not, then we have misled many generations of cadets. *

3.3.3 The buffering function in any organization has a bright and a dark side. As a device for coping on a short-term basis with turbulence and allowing the decision-making process to continue without disturbance it may be adaptive. As a defensive, long-term measure in which one estate or the other -- the commander or the NCO's--is isolated and protected from the vicissitudes of the other, the only ultimate effects are maladaptive. Communication at the level of commander to command effectively ceases; or, since as we have observed, parallel lines of information (and hence turbulence) exist, an imbalance of informational, attitudinal and emotional input may exist which may disrupt morale and satisfaction and hence system effectiveness. Since these affective factors are of immediate importance to the military organization, particularly in combat, a Command Sergeant Major with undefined or arbitrary and perhaps maladaptive duties at the boundaries may sow confusion where he is supposed to reap order and efficiency. ^

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Gleaned from the TRADOC position and the foregoing comments are four possible courses of action:

4.1.1 Eliminate the Command Sergeant Major.

4.1.2 Take no action.

4.1.3 Enumerate specific responsibilities for the CSM, and bestow commensurate authority.

4.1.4 Take greater pains to educate all (that is, not only CSM's, but also officers, NCO's and enlisted soldiers) concerned in the present functions and potentials of the CSM.

4.2 Eliminate the Command Sergeant Major.

4.2.1 The question here is one of short-term cost in NCO morale by implicit repudiation of his potential and prestige, balanced against possible long-term improvement of officer and NCO communication by elimination of what could be, in many cases, a contrived position-- one which can create confusion in its search for a role where no apparent role-vacuum exists. Since the immediate cost, considering the tremendous perceived prestige of the position and the hard knocks sustained by the NCO corps during the MVA turnover cited by GEN DePuy, is potentially devastating the reviewers recognize that it may not be acceptable. That its undesirability may be based upon emotional considerations rather than those of logical organizational effectiveness is unimportant; emotional issues have a logic of their own in an Army which must expect to engage in combat and sustain loss of life, since such a dramatic outcome is less than logical to the soldier who must pay that price.

4.2.2 Whether the institution of the CSM is strictly in harmony with the historical development of the United States Army and its parent society is probably quite academic, since the institutions of such a system tend to acquire a dynamism all their own. This is certainly true of the Command Sergeant Major's position, since the observer who experiences its influence seldom has leisure to explore its historical and societal precedents. The reviewers admit that it is probably here to stay.

4.3 Take no action.

This idea had considerable merit to the extent that the disruption of further change in the midst of a time of changes will be avoided. However, it evades the issue, since the reviewers agree in spirit with GEN DePuy's fundamental assertion that something is wrong.

4.4 Enumerate specific responsibilities.

This alternative is deceptively simple, for two reasons:

4.4.1 Specificity implies in this case that authority and consequently responsibility commensurate with the position of the CSM is interpreted by the observer and the CSM himself be officially institutionalized. This reduces, as a side-effect the flexibility of the commander to make appropriate use of the CSM and it attempts, as noted earlier, to create authority where there is no vacuum. The result may be counterproductive both in terms of our current system of rewards and punishments and overall unit effectiveness.

4.4.2 Enumeration is made elusive by the very diversity of unit missions. The enumerated duties must either be so nebulous as to be no significant improvement over the present state of uncertainty, or constitute a separate job description for every sort of organization which rates a CSM. How can the tasks of the Command Sergeant Major of the US Military Academy be considered directly analogous to those of a tank battalion CSM? The result might well be still further confusion.

4.5 Education.

4.5.1 The intent of this alternative is to insert at the level of the Sergeants Major Academy, Branch Officer Basic and Advanced Courses, Staff College and Senior Service College levels comprehensive consideration of the actual organizational functions of the CSM. The goal here would be to preserve the commander's flexibility in employing his CSM and avoid the abuses that such flexible treatment can propagate. The educational emphasis could deal with an understanding of possible approaches to unstructured, changing organizational situations in which the students may find themselves.

4.5.2 Examination of the POI and goals of the Sergeants Major Academy suggests to the reviewers that the direction being taken is generally productive and encouraging, though there is some concern that the emphasis on associate degrees may be somewhere between too little and too much; the desirability of a baccalaureate degree, for instance, is not clear, since it seems unproductive to educate an NCO to levels associated with junior officers and withhold a commission on grounds of age and expertise.

4.5.3 However, extending an understanding of the CSM role and most productive uses to all soldiers involved offers a change of eliminating waste or abuse without damaging or abolishing the institution; and preserves the spirit of the CSM program and the prerogatives of the commander.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

5.1 That the present Command Sergeant Major program, while it has developed through the influences of increasingly divergent tradition and social/organizational reality, is probably still institutionally desirable, and should be retained.

5.2 That the most effective course of action in the long term is probably a specific effort to increase understanding of the CSM's present functional areas of responsibility, rather than either eliminating the position or attempting to specify discrete duties by regulation. The organizational and disciplinary human systems problems that would accompany a discrete duty approach seem to offer more problems than the present system.