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JUNIOR LEADER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – WHO HAS THE TIME?

Steven Metz

While researching General Matthew Ridgway's oral history at the Military History Institute, author Tom Ricks came across this astute quote: "My advice to any young officer is read—read—read. And learn from the successes of the great ones and their failures." Few Americans speak with greater authority on the requirements of military leadership than Ridgway. He commanded the 82nd Airborne Division in World War II; the 8th Army in the Korean War; replaced Douglas MacArthur as the overall commander in Korea; served as Supreme Allied Commander in Europe; and then as Army Chief of Staff. He was both an exceptional leader and a strategist. We should heed what Ridgway had to say.

Ridgway's counsel concerning the importance of reading for young officers is no surprise. The quality of its junior leaders—both young officers and senior noncommissioned officers—is one reason that the United States has the foremost Army in history. Due to the Army's dedication to excellence, it is able to gain the commitment of outstanding young men and women who then undertake sustained and rigorous professional development while serving.

The complexity of the contemporary security environment and the demands placed on the Army make professional development—both the formal component undertaken in courses and schools and the informal elements—more pressing than ever. Now, it is not only about leadership and the art of war, but also about culture, language, and management. In a very real sense, the professional development of the Army's junior leaders is vital to national security. Why then, is it even necessary to make the point about the importance of reading and other forms of informal professional development for junior leaders? Motivation is not the issue. Junior leaders are certainly aware of the importance of professional development. The problem is time.

Today more than ever, junior leaders are exceptionally busy. Their jobs demand long hours. Most have young families which need attention. Beginning with General Earl Wheeler in 1963, many Army chiefs of staff provided an official reading list for both junior and senior leaders. But the implication was that this should be done on one's own time. This requirement might have made sense when Ridgway and his peers were young officers and military life moved at a more leisurely pace. Even Army Chief

of Staff George Marshall was famously able to take a daily horse ride, at least until the onset of World War II. Today's leaders are, to put it lightly, a bit more preoccupied.

But there is a solution: senior leaders should consider reading and other forms of informal professional development, like physical training, to be a vital part of duty time. Here is how this could work. Every commander and other senior leader whose unit is not deployed or preparing for an impending deployment should set a target of around 10% of their staff's time for reading and informal professional development. This, of course, would require commanders and senior leaders to exercise rigorous discipline for the other demands placed on their staffs. They would need to seriously examine every staff function—preparing reports and briefings, attending meetings as a representative, and all forms of what could be called the “care and feeding” of senior leaders—to decide what is absolutely necessary and what could be sacrificed to free time for reading and informal professional development. This assessment should be brutally honest and begin with the assumption that any staff function that is not absolutely crucial for mission success could be pared. Often one or two fewer versions of a briefing (or a shorter briefing) or half as many reports and meetings would suffice.

Such a program would be an investment in the Army's future. But it would require accountability. Junior leaders should regularly report on their reading and individual professional development. Duty time should be set aside for discussions and workshops. But again, the time for this should not come “out of hide” or be considered an additional requirement. It should be seen as a central element of duty and made available by cutting back existing staff work.

Undoubtedly there are many commanders and senior leaders who already take this approach or something like it. But to really work, it should become an integral and universal part of the Army's culture, something expected of all commanders and other senior leaders—just one of ways that the Army does its business. Ultimately the informal professional development of a both noncommissioned and commissioned officers should be as important to a performance evaluation as other elements of staff work. Today's junior leaders, most with multiple deployments in challenging environments, understand its value. When it becomes apparent that commanders and other senior leaders do as well by carving out time—that most valuable of commodities—for professional development; then the Army will make great strides in not only sustaining its quality, but augmenting it.

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