

Combat Training Centers: A Milestone in the Journey to Readiness

■ By Lt. Gen. Gustavo “Gus” Perna



Last year, the Army rolled out new plans for the three combat training centers (CTCs) as part of the chief of staff of the Army’s priority to build combat readiness. As you will read in this issue of *Army Sustainment*, logisticians have been important beneficiaries of the centers. We now better understand the urgency of changes that need to be made, and I see progress in our ability to set theaters and get to the next fight, as both individuals and units.

This year, 140,000 Soldiers will rotate through one of these CTCs—the National Training Center, at Fort Irwin, California; the Joint Readiness Training Center, at Fort Polk, Louisiana; or the Joint Multinational Readiness Center, at Hohenfels, Germany. The two United States-based CTCs are conducting 18 rotations, and the Joint Multinational Readiness Center is conducting 11 training events involving many multinational partners. We also added two rotations for Army National Guard brigades, underscoring our commitment to readiness of the total force.

Most importantly, the focus of the training has shifted from counterinsurgency operations to preparing for a decisive action fight. This means commanders must shift their thinking and methodology.

Frankly, I see too many very smart and talented commanders who were battle-tested in Iraq and Afghanistan but are still mentally locked on those wars. They have to stop thinking about Army Force Generation, forward operating bases, the Logistics Civil Augmentation Program, and 50 days of supply because that is not today’s Army. It is one thing to say we can now deploy from home station on short notice, land at an austere location, and bring in and distribute all of the equipment and supplies necessary to execute the mission. It is another to validate at a CTC that we actually can do those things.

To be successful at CTCs, commanders need to develop a vision, clearly express it, and allocate time and resources to accomplish it. I offer an approach to your preparation that focuses on five areas—mission, training, maintenance and supply, leader development, and team building. This issue’s hip-pocket guide is a handy tool to assist you.

Mission

Preparation should start with defining the mission. If you understand what the mission is, it will help you focus on the things that you should be doing to synchronize and integrate support. I cannot overemphasize the importance of a clearly defined mission. You will not know how much time and effort to allocate to training, leader development, and all of the other areas if you do not

have the right focus from the start.

Fortunately, the Army has issued standardized mission essential tasks for all units that can guide you. They are the cornerstone of what we expect our logisticians to be proficient at. Understanding these tasks will help you to determine your units’ strengths and weaknesses.

Beyond that, when you plan sustainment support for a brigade’s combined arms live-fire exercise, you need to look at your collective and section tasks and execute them in an expeditionary manner. For example, why not deploy the supply support activity or set up an ammunition transfer and holding point to issue supplies in a tactical environment? Or ensure logistics information systems are used daily in garrison or the field? Or routinely integrate the forward support companies into brigade support operations? Only logisticians who are competent in the field can achieve mission objectives.

Training

The training plan must support the mission. Period. We have all seen units that want to refuel on the move, and once they figure it out, they always want to practice it. But, based on your mission, each commander must ask: What skills does my unit need now? Is my battle staff proficient in the military decisionmaking process? And how often have we exercised it?

Before the training cycle begins and throughout the process, keep assessing yourself, your leaders, and your formations’ abilities to execute your well-defined mission. You have more requirements than you have time. It is critical that you



select training tasks that support the mission and do not just fill up the calendar. Train to execute your mission.

Do not be afraid to create a climate that lets your Soldiers fail, because without the chance to fail, they will never grow. You do not want them to fail on the battlefield, so push them at the CTC. It is important to take people out of their comfort zones and put them into situations where they are professionally uncomfortable. They will either excel or fail, and both will make them better Soldiers and leaders.

As you train, do not lower your standards. If you approve something at levels less than 100 percent, you establish a new standard and accept poor performance. This training gap will surface during your rotation or,

worse, in combat.

After returning from your rotation, as part of your continuous assessment, it is critical that you allocate time to retrain and refine your approach to make your team even better. Leaders need to keep the after-action review process alive.

Maintenance and Supply

Too often brigade combat teams culminate CTC rotations early because they lose critical combat power, and too often the culprits of this loss are vehicles that are not maintained properly. When crossing the line of departure, maneuver commanders need maximum combat power.

A high state of readiness requires having the proper systems and routines in place that will result in having the right parts on hand and the

reach-back capabilities that enable Soldiers to fix equipment. Establish these systems and routines long before the start of the CTC rotation.

Once I asked a brigade commander at the National Training Center how long he had been conducting brigade maintenance meetings. His answer was, "Sir, we planned to do them but got overwhelmed and haven't executed [them] yet." That was not an answer; it was a hope.

Commanders must use command maintenance, logistics synchronization meetings, and materiel readiness reviews to foster a culture of "what right looks like." Supply and maintenance do not operate in separate bubbles. It is imperative that brigade maintenance officers and supply support activity accountable officers synchronize their re-

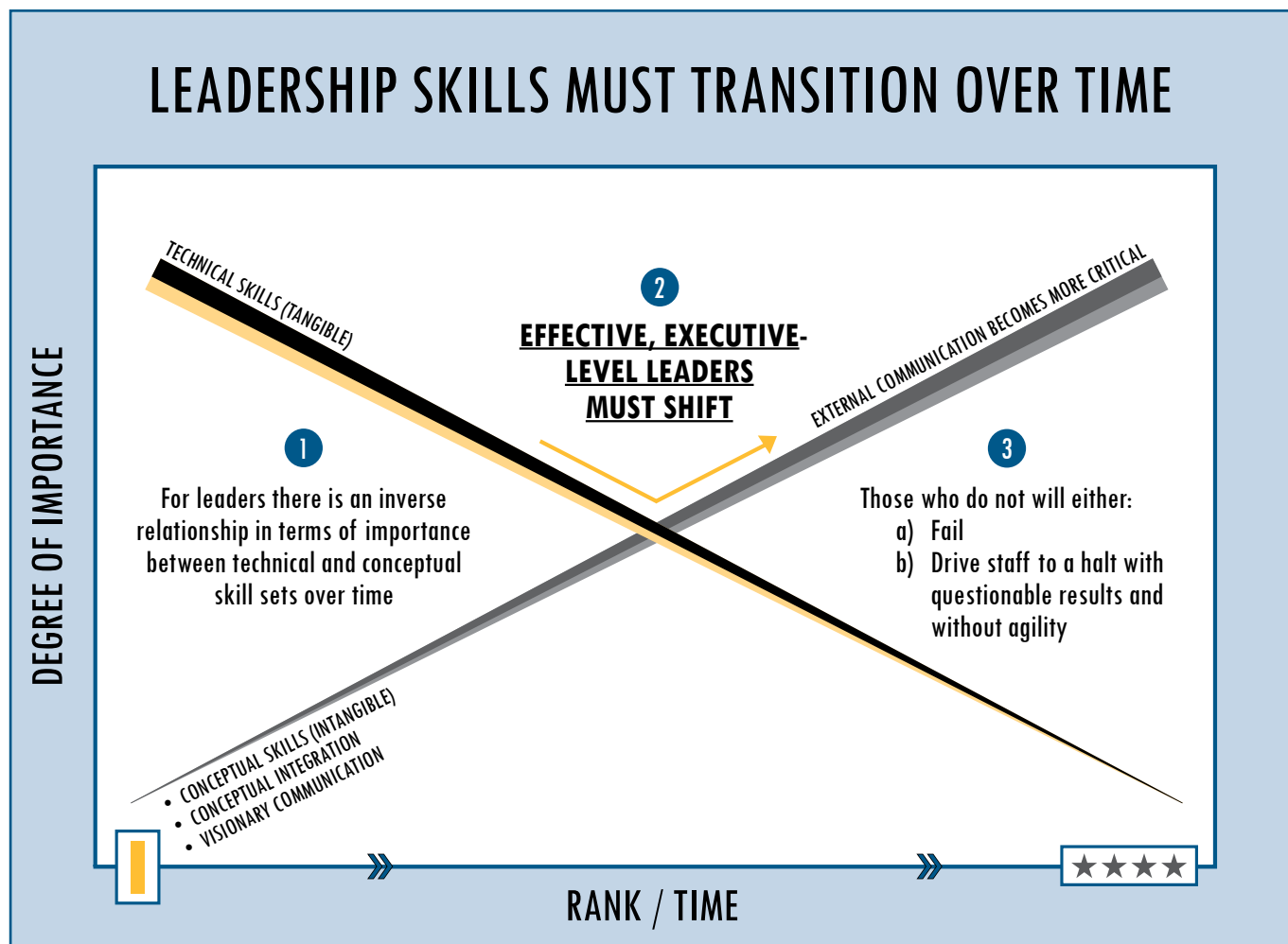


Figure 1. Army leaders must develop new skills as they advance through their careers.



quirements to ensure equipment readiness. Success depends on the interconnectedness of unit-level maintenance and supply.

Building Leaders

As you prepare for CTC rotations, make sure your Soldiers at all

you need to build a team to achieve the capabilities you want. Building a team is tough work. You must emphasize the capabilities needed to achieve the effect you want in the operational environment.

Team building is not made any easier when young commanders

Materiel Command's brigade logistics support teams, and the Defense Logistics Agency. Including everyone provides the logistics linkage between operational assets and strategic enablers.

A key aspect of team building is synchronizing tactical units (forward support companies and brigade support battalions) with operational assets. Building relationships affords leaders the opportunity to disseminate important information and synchronize units and equipment, which ultimately gives commanders the freedom of movement and maneuver needed for the decisive action fight.

Effective relationships are not built over night and cannot be surged in times of crises. If you have not properly invested time in them, you cannot expect the same results. Therefore, integrating operational and strategic assets into your training and CTC rotations is the ultimate goal in relationship building and reinforces the notion that you do not have to own it to control it.

A CTC rotation should be viewed as a milestone on every Army unit's journey to readiness. It is not the culminating event. Readiness takes time to build, and it does not last forever.

When I returned from my CTC rotations as a commander, I always had a simple test—if my Soldiers told me it was easier than our preparatory field training exercises, I knew I had prepared them at the right level. We need to build an Army where every Soldier has executed individual and collective training in the field and then demonstrated and validated at the CTC that they are trained and ready to go to war.

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levels take advantage of the Army's great formal leader development programs. But, to be honest, the real leader building comes from the mentoring, coaching, and training you provide every day.

As a brigade commander, you will do more things than I had to do as a brigade commander, but do not let those get in the way of developing our future. Building leaders is not a "one size fits all" activity. As you can see in figure 1 (on page 3), the skills that our logisticians need shift over time. For junior officers, technical skills are important, but as they rise in rank, conceptual skills are more critical. Great majors may know all of the numbers, but in order to be great higher-ranking officers, they must also understand how to synchronize, integrate, and echelon commodities and materiel in support of maneuver commanders.

Our Army needs dynamic leaders who can adapt and overcome unplanned and unprecedented challenges, manage failure, and enforce the standards and discipline needed for success in high-pressure environments. So, work every day to grow those leaders for our Army.

Team Building

Long before you arrive at a CTC,

are wrapped up about task organization diagrams, who is wearing what patch, and who controls what. What you really need to focus on is leveraging all sustainment capabilities within your footprint and putting them where they are needed so that the Army is ready for the initial stages of a decisive action engagement.

When I was the director of logistics for U.S. Forces-Iraq, the note I used to put on my white board was, "Am I utilizing all the capability available to retrograde people and equipment out of this country?" I was not interested in what I could control. I was interested in what I could influence.

My point is commanders need to be constantly thinking about leveraging all capabilities and building a team that will be a combat multiplier. This starts with increasing your field of vision and widening your aperture.

At the division level, combat sustainment support battalions are critical organizations that must be integrated into the divisional relationship. CTC rotations should not be the first time that they support a brigade combat team. Battle rhythm events must involve sustainment brigades, combat sustainment support battalions, the Army