

Armor Branch Update

Broadening the BRO: an Innovative Approach to Broadening Experiences within the Big Red One

by MAJ David Niederauer

After graduating from the U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College in Summer 2014, I was assigned to 1st Infantry Division, Fort Riley, KS, and was selected to serve in an internally created broadening assignment. This broadening assignment was the result of an initiative by MG Paul E. Funk II, commanding general of 1st Infantry Division, to create opportunities for select field-grade officers within the division to gain experience working on operational and strategic challenges and to prepare these officers for future senior leadership positions. During this internal broadening assignment, I worked for the division G-1 as the officer-in-charge (OIC) of the Big Red One's (BRO) newly formed BRO-Soldier for Life (SFL) Team.

The purpose of the BRO-SFL Team is to synchronize efforts between 1st Infantry Division and Fort Riley's SFL stakeholders and to make decisions related to the BRO/Fort Riley SFL Program. MG Funk's intent for the BRO-SFL Team is to increase synchronization among all SFL stakeholders, enhance the BRO/Fort Riley SFL Program and prepare Soldiers to transition to civilian life – ready to obtain employment, education, health care and living accommodations.



Figure 1. MSG Mitch Hanson, BRO-SFL Team NCO in charge, conducts a BRO-SFL leader-training session with the officers and NCOs of 1st Infantry Division's Sustainment Brigade. (Photo by Amanda Kim Stairrett, 1st Infantry Division Public Affairs Office)

As an Armor officer, I have served in maneuver assignments at the battalion level and below for the past 15 years. Prior to my assignment to the BRO-SFL Team, I knew very little about the Army's SFL Program and the evolution of the Army Career and Alumni Program to the SFL-Transition Assistance Program (SFL-TAP). Although I was aware of transition, I had not considered the challenges the Army is experiencing with strength reductions and preparing Soldiers to transition to civilian life.

Prior to this broadening assignment, I was concerned with learning how to become an operations officer, and later, an executive officer at the battalion and brigade levels. Transition was a general concept in the back of my mind – an event occurring at the end of service in the Army. I did not have an appreciation or conscious recognition that

service in the Army does not last forever. All Soldiers will eventually leave the Army and transition to civilian life. Planning and preparation for this inevitable process must occur long before the decision to leave the Army is made.

The opportunity to work outside of my maneuver training and experience provided me with a new perspective on one of the Army's strategic challenges: educating and preparing Soldiers for their inevitable transition from the Army. I also gained experience working on a division staff that was conducting simultaneous operations at Fort Riley, Kuwait and Iraq in support of Operation Inherent Resolve. Also, I gained insights into the operations of the Fort Riley garrison and the coordinating efforts between the garrison headquarters and the division headquarters.

Lessons-learned

Overall, I will take the following experiences gained from this broadening assignment with me to future assignments.

- **Transition mindset.** One of MG Funk's imperatives states: "The Army is a people business." Transition is also a people business, and I discovered that a cultural change must occur within the Army regarding how Soldiers and leaders think about transition. Transition must be communicated and reinforced by leaders as a developmental process that occurs early and often throughout all Soldiers' active service rather than compartmentalizing transition as an event that occurs at the end of service.

Similar to the Army operations process, all Soldiers must plan, prepare, execute and continually assess transition plans throughout their service. As part of the Soldier lifecycle, the Army has recognized the need for Soldiers to plan and prepare for their eventual transition to civilian life. The Army has created the individual development plan (IDP) for Soldiers to set and achieve civilian education and career goals, along with military education and career goals, throughout their service on active duty. The IDP should be established at a Soldier's first permanent assignment and should be reviewed and updated with Soldiers and their first-line leaders. The IDP should also be periodically reviewed by the Soldier's chain of command.

Change and transition are constant in the Army. Soldiers continually change jobs, rank, units and duty stations. Internalizing a transition mindset helps Soldiers and leaders plan and prepare for the inevitable process of transitioning from the Army into civilian life.

- **Networking.** Another one of MG Funk's imperatives states: "A good idea only becomes great when it is shared." Personally meeting, interacting with and getting to know command teams, OIC / noncommissioned officers (NCOs) in charge, program managers, directors and other stakeholders is an essential component of taking a program from concept to execution. It is easy to think and plan in isolation from other agencies and individuals who own and control required resources. Initially, networking was a challenge for the BRO-SFL Team because we were coordinating with a diverse group of division and garrison agencies and military and civilian organizations. In several instances, we reached out to other agencies, employers and educational institutions to develop relationships that did not previously exist. Networking fosters relationships. Relationships foster trust. Trust fosters unity of effort. Unity of effort fosters mission accomplishment.
- **Unity of effort.** Another change that must occur is an organizational mindset of collaboration and unity of effort among stakeholders. I discovered that many of the relationships and communication networks among the division and Fort Riley garrison agencies either did not exist or did not promote a broader collaborative team effort. An unconventional approach to achieve the desired organizational change was moving the BRO-SFL Team from the G-1 office in the division headquarters into an office in the Fort Riley SFL-TAP Center.

Working in the SFL-TAP Center allowed the BRO-SFL Team to directly collaborate and partner with the SFL transition-services manager (TSM) and SFL-TAP staff. This move allowed the BRO-SFL Team to develop a close relationship with the TSM, get his recommendations and buy-in for BRO-SFL Team initiatives, and delineate areas of responsibility and ownership between the BRO-SFL Team and the larger collective effort. Working in the SFL-TAP Center also allowed the BRO-SFL Team to observe and attend SFL-TAP briefings, workshops and networking events, and provided the BRO-SFL Team with a comprehensive understanding of TAP. Also, the close relationship

between the BRO-SFL Team and the SFL TSM facilitated a broader working relationship that included the education-services officer and the director of human resources.

- **Communication:** Communication is a critical component of any job. Because the BRO-SFL Team was a new initiative, there were few guiding policies or documents that existed prior to developing the program. As the BRO-SFL Team OIC, I struggled with recognizing when to ask for guidance and help while developing the program. Understanding that I was responsible for problem-solving and mission accomplishment, I missed many opportunities to have developmental conversations with my boss and other key members of the collective effort because I felt I should have the answers or recommendations for program initiatives.

I realized that it is often necessary to revisit the problem, ask questions and recommend new approaches to developing solutions. As we developed the BRO-SFL Program, I recognized more opportunities to develop, refine or abandon initiatives and to work smaller-scope to larger-scope ideas to gain a better understanding of what was suitable for our Soldiers and our program.

I will incorporate the experiences of this broadening assignment into my next assignment as a battalion-operations officer. To facilitate communication and understanding within the team, I will ensure that staff products and briefs include clearly defined purposes and outcomes and that all tasks are delineated and understood. A learning and growing organization requires continuous assessment of the problem and approaches for solving the problem. Also, organizations should continually assess whether they have the right people bringing the right assets to the team; sometimes more people and resources are not better. I discovered the value of networking with other staff sections, units and agencies to promote the team's collective expertise and to leverage available resources within and outside the organization to accomplish the mission.



Figure2. MAJ David Niederauer, BRO-SFL Team OIC, conducts a BRO-SFL leader-training session with officers and NCOs from 1st Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade. (Photo by Amanda Kim Stairrett, 1st Infantry Division Public Affairs Office)

Way ahead

Recommendations for improving this internal broadening assignment and the BRO-SFL Team include continuous efforts to communicate, plan and synchronize operations among the BRO-SFL Team, division and garrison leaders and all SFL stakeholders. The BRO-SFL Team made consistent improvements in these areas, especially after we began operating in the SFL-TAP Center. However, communication, planning and synchronization among stakeholders are challenges that require regular attention.

Another area of improvement is the ongoing need to inform and educate Soldiers and leaders on the SFL Program and how this program directly applies to all Soldiers. Overall, there is a lack of awareness and understanding of what SFL is and why planning and preparation for transition are important for all Soldiers. Also, messaging and consistently communicating program events and outcomes through SFL-TAP, Army Community Service, Education Services, unit chains of command and social media are areas that require continuous effort.

A final area of improvement is the need for the BRO-SFL Team to expand its efforts to reach out to command teams and include them in the planning and execution of BRO-SFL leader training. An assessment of the first training sessions the BRO-SFL Team conducted with all leaders across the division revealed the need to include command teams in the planning and execution of training. SFL is a commander's program, and command teams should participate, provide guidance and intent, and have the ability to tailor training to their unit's needs. Involving command teams in the planning and execution of BRO-SFL leader training promotes a top-down approach that fosters buy-in and ownership at command echelons and complements the bottom-up approach of training individual Soldiers on the BRO-SFL Program.

Conclusion

This broadening opportunity challenged me and pushed me beyond my comfort zone by forcing me to work outside of the systems and equipment familiar to me. This experience forced me to continually evaluate my critical-thinking skills, communication skills, leadership and approach to problem-solving and mission accomplishment. Never before have I been responsible for developing a division-level program from a concept and for convincing a large and diverse group of military and civilian stakeholders that this program is important and that they should commit time and resources to it. I am thankful for MG Funk's vision to create broadening opportunities within 1st Infantry Division and for the mentorship and development I received from the division G-1. This broadening experience provided me with personal and professional growth that I will take with me to my future assignments.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

BRO – Big Red One

IDP – individual development plan

NCO – noncommissioned officer

OIC – officer in charge

SFL – Soldier for Life

TAP – Transition Assistance Program

TSM – transition-services manager